

# bicultural program long term impact report

2017 – 2023

**cohealth acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the land and waterways on which our offices stand, the Boon Wurrung, Wurundjeri and Wathaurong people, and pays respects to Elders past and present.**

We acknowledge the Stolen Generations and the historical and ongoing impact of colonisation on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

We also recognise the resilience, strength and pride of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' living culture is the oldest continuing culture in the world, and we acknowledge that the land and waterways are a place of age-old ceremonies of celebration, initiation and renewal.

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# what is a bicultural worker?

A bicultural worker is a person employed to use their cultural knowledge, language skills, lived experience, and community connections to work with people who they share a lived experience with and with mainstream organisations. Bicultural workers elevate community voices, advocate for their needs, co-design and deliver programs, share information, and facilitate cultural safety (cohealth, 2019).



# background and context

In 2016 cohealth's Refugee Health Team began a journey to improve engagement with refugee communities beyond the people they were working with, who as clients often had complex health needs. The team's aim was to improve engagement with communities, to identify their needs and work collaboratively to improve health and wellbeing, by engaging a community engagement worker.

In 2017 the community engagement worker conducted a literature review which identified that bicultural workers are often key to better community engagement with multicultural communities, due to their shared language, community connections and lived experiences (Fischer, Saudia & Kutner 2007; Mortensen 2011; Piper 2016). cohealth did not have bicultural workers at that time.

These findings encouraged the refugee health team to conduct a needs analysis with 30 individuals from 14 various organisations across the health, community and public sector and various bicultural workers, to explore the role and importance of bicultural work.

The outcomes further highlighted what had been identified in the literature; bicultural workers facilitate more successful engagements in community work, yet consultations also revealed that there was limited targeted training and employment opportunities for them.

The outcomes of this needs assessment and ongoing co-design with bicultural workers informed the development of cohealth's bicultural program.

The objective of this evaluation report is to assess the progress, success, and areas for improvement of the bicultural program to date.

# bicultural program approach and aims

cohealth's bicultural program values the shared language, culture, lived experience and community connections of bicultural workers (BCWs). We recognise their unique skills and expertise in engaging their communities and believe they are best placed to design and deliver community-led programs that respond to their community's needs.

## The program aims to

- Build upon existing knowledge of bicultural workers through the delivery of an internship program and employment opportunities for graduates to facilitate community-led projects.
- Empower refugee communities through delivery of community led projects that are co-designed to respond to their priorities and needs.
- Provide opportunities for peer support and reflective practice for bicultural workers through regular group supervision.
- Provide ongoing professional development and networking opportunities through the Victorian bicultural workers' network.
- Further professionalise the role of bicultural work through the development of 'The Professional Standards for Bicultural Work' and associated policies, frameworks, and tools.
- Build organisational capacity to employ bicultural workers in a culturally safe way through delivery of professional standards for Bicultural Work training that responds to common issues experienced by bicultural workers relating to cultural safety, volunteerism, colonialism, and race-based discrimination.

# overarching objectives

1. Develop participant skills and confidence to act as bicultural workers (BCWs) and support employment readiness through professional development, information sharing and networking
2. Improve the health and wellbeing of refugee and asylum seeker communities through delivery of community-led projects
3. Work in partnership with bicultural workers to;
  - Educate organisations and their staff about the role of bicultural workers, the benefits they bring and facilitate employment opportunities.
  - Build sector capacity to employ bicultural workers in a culturally safe way.



# bicultural program outcomes

# 214,684

people directly reached



## 280 bicultural workers engaged

Bicultural workers engaged through the Victorian BCWs Network (26 BCWs employed at cohealth as casual staff & 2 part time bicultural project officers)



## 212,360 refugees engaged

Refugee community members engaged through bicultural led projects



## 1,603 staff engaged

Staff from the community, health and government sectors engaged in capacity building



## 138 capacity building workshops

Capacity building workshops delivered to bicultural workers



## 150 community led projects delivered



## 14,350 hours of paid employment

Paid employment for bicultural workers across different programs at cohealth



## 1,700 employment or opportunities

Employment or capacity building opportunities shared with bicultural workers



## 130 professional references provided



## 73 professional development opportunities

Delivered to staff from community/health sector

For more information on program outcomes annual reports can be accessed at  
[bit.ly/biculturalprogram](https://bit.ly/biculturalprogram)



# evaluation methods

To evaluate the bicultural program cohealth recruited an external evaluator with lived experience of being bicultural and expertise in research and evaluation.

## 17 in-depth interviews were conducted.



**7 cohealth bicultural workers** from varying cultural backgrounds, who were involved in the bicultural program for varying periods of time from 2 to 7 years.



**4 staff representatives** from Alfred Mental and Addiction Health (Research Lead), cohealth (Community Engagement Manager), Victorian Refugee Health Program (Statewide Facilitator) and Western Public Health Unit (Community Engagement Manager).



**6 community members** who had participated in projects delivered by cohealth bicultural workers (Tibetan, Chin, Syrian, Ethiopian, Eritrean).

The interviews were transcribed, and thematic analysis was used to organise the data.

# evaluation outcomes

The evaluation was completed in relation to the key objectives. All 17 individuals participated in the in-depth interviews. However, the questions were tailored for each cohort.

# objective one

**Develop participants' skills and confidence to act as bicultural workers and support employment readiness through professional development, information sharing and networking.**

To evaluate the program's impact of objective one, bicultural workers were asked about their experiences of the internship program and how cohealth had supported them to develop their skills and confidence.

Questions explored topics such as;

- professional development and career progression
- skills and confidence to deliver community-led projects
- the challenges of being a bicultural worker
- support offered through the program

All bicultural workers expressed an increase in professional readiness (acquiring new skills and gaining more confidence) through being part of the internship program.

***It gave me knowledge, increased my confidence and connected me with different organisations and different groups of people. Even people who can, work with me in the future. It really means a lot to me.***

*Bicultural worker*



*The skills and everything that we've learned through the internship has given me a sense of being more professional. Before (the training), I was not confident enough with my skills or knowledge to apply for different roles. Now I feel like I'm able to apply and I've gained confidence to progress in my career.*

*Bicultural worker*

Bicultural workers expressed increased skills and confidence in planning and delivering community-led projects with their communities.

*Through the internship program, I learned how to plan and do reporting. I learnt this through practicing and always referring to my manager if there's something I'm not sure about it. That is how I got the skills. I'm pretty confident with it now.*

*Bicultural worker*

*Delivering projects is not easy, but it's a good opportunity for us to know how we can deliver them to our community, especially, they are from different backgrounds... inviting participants, choosing topics, workshops, sessions, activities, events and how we can deliver them. Booking the hall, inviting the presenters, feedback, and evaluation for the program.*

*Bicultural worker*

*The bicultural program is based on a co-designed model. It's good because you don't just do it yourself, you do it with community members. You make sure that their voices and their suggestions are included in every program that you want to deliver. It's based on the concept of a strength-based approach. You identify what the strength of the community is, then you can start building on this and give them more power.*

*Bicultural worker*

The internship program created better employment opportunities for bicultural workers. This was an enormous opportunity to transition into professional work and gain meaningful employment that they value.

*The bicultural program has changed my mind and opened opportunities for me. Instead of working in a car factory or other factory jobs, I now have other options. I have gained additional skills which have helped me to improve professionally and to help my community.*

*Bicultural worker*

Some moved into full time roles as Bicultural Project officers after completing the internship program.

*I came to Australia with no training in community service. This program has been great in terms of providing me with skills to be able to apply for different roles. I was successful because of being part of the bicultural program enabled me to work with other community organisations like the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre. This program has given me the skills and the knowledge to use in other workplaces.*

*Bicultural worker*

*I started as a participant in the bicultural internship program as a bicultural worker. Now I am working as a project officer. I'm facilitating the internship this year which is something that shows my career is developing.*

*Bicultural worker*



# challenges of bicultural work

While the participants were aware of their capacity as bicultural workers, they also highlighted the complexity of balancing the dual identity of being a worker and a community member or leader. Community expectations are high and bicultural workers felt they were consistently being asked to support with issues outside their expertise or expected to work outside of their contracted hours. This was mainly because community members generally viewed bicultural workers as very knowledgeable and capable of addressing their needs.

*You know, being a community leader, a bicultural worker and interpreter, I have a lot of people asking me for help. Sometimes they are wanting help at nighttime and on the weekends.*

*Bicultural worker*

*People think that you can do everything that is related to service providers, or you'll be available 24 hours or 7 days a week. These are some of the challenges we face. We try to empower the community as much as we can, but we still have community members who call you anytime, sometimes in the middle of night not considering that you have other responsibilities.*

*Bicultural worker*



Organisational requirements can sometimes clash with cultural norms and BCWs are not always able to meet community expectations. This was sometimes seen as a lack of care or empathy and can have negative ramifications for BCWs in both their personal and professional lives.

*I ask them to come during working hours so that I can serve them. I ask this so I can have my own time with my family. Then of course, some people criticise that, no matter what and even if you are doing your best. Sometimes there are people who are never satisfied.*

*Bicultural worker*

*The challenge is understanding the policy at work and not neglecting my cultures as well... trying to be in between both, doing this with boundaries so that it doesn't harm me personally, my personal life or my family commitments.*

*Bicultural worker*

*The challenges of being a bicultural worker is having to represent the organization at the same time as advocating for community members, community groups. There's expectations from both sides, and you have to fulfill those expectations and it can be challenging.*

*Bicultural worker*

***It's very important that organisations have relationships with community through bicultural workers, but also making sure that they have the systems of support for bicultural workers. Management need training and understanding of what bicultural work means ... I think that's very important. Otherwise, bicultural workers themselves can face issues, challenges and burnout.***

*Bicultural worker*

# supports received

Most BCWs said the program supported them through training, reflective practice, supervision, peer support and other support systems.

*The supervision group is where we debrief on challenges when delivering projects or when performing our daily work. Every kind of challenge will be shared with the group and they will come up with solutions and suggestions. You feel supported because you know that you are not the only one going through those challenges. You get to learn from each other to improve the way you interact with your community members.*

Bicultural worker

*The regular supervision that we have, the friendly environment that we work in, the openness and the trust in the organisation. It helps that I can share how I feel with my manager knowing that I'm not going to be sacked.*

Bicultural worker

*Before mental health first aid training, I was answering the phone all the time, even if it's in the night. After that, I said, no, I must take care of myself to get time for me, not just for the community... it's helped me a lot.*

Bicultural worker

*cohealth has created a standard in what has essentially been quite an unstandardised space. We've relied a lot on our community leaders and our cultural leaders in a volunteering capacity, and they have always been doing the kind of work that we are doing now. But this has created some safety around that and some framework.*

Bicultural worker



# objective two

## Provide opportunities for bicultural workers and their communities to self-determine through delivery of community-led projects.

BCWs and community members were asked questions about the following topics to understand the outcomes relating to objective two.

- Community's perception about cohealth bicultural program and bicultural workers.
- The importance of bicultural workers in supporting resettlement in Australia; including system navigation, accessing support services, and understanding of rights.
- The impact of bicultural workers delivery of community-led projects on community health and wellbeing.

The bicultural program has introduced the community to cohealth, and this has increased positive perceptions, trust, and services utilisation.

*I don't really think that our community was aware of cohealth until BCWs introduced it to us, not a lot of people knew what cohealth is or what they're doing. After BCWs and community leaders came to us and we started working together, we started to understand that cohealth is not just like focusing on health, but it also focuses on the development of young people through workshops and recreational activities in sports. The way that they promote wellbeing of young people or the community is strength based, which is amazing.*

*Community member*



Bicultural workers played a crucial role in the resettling process, a bridge between their communities and the Australian services.

*A bicultural worker for our community is a liaison between the broader Australian communities and the Syrian community; an individual helping us to connect with services, helping us to learn more about the country, and consequently, someone who helps us with an easier and a smoother settlement in Australia.*

Community member

*Bicultural workers help community members to link with different organisations. Now cohealth has a worker who can speak our language. Through this, community members, especially the elderly, can access different services such as health or something like a mental health program.*

Community member

*It has raised our awareness of the appropriate service, how we can reach them, how we can get support from them as people newly arrived from a refugee background. It's a bit difficult for us but during the program and during the sessions and workshops, it has become easier to know about more organisations and services.*

Community member

cohealth was a partner for supporting community-led organisations with funding, mentorship, and training. This support was important for fostering trust between community leaders and their communities.

*We have been struggling to get funds to deliver community projects. cohealth is helping us with a lot of project funding and when we deliver the community will trust us. Since we started working with cohealth we have been delivering our projects professionally and timely with cohealth covering all the budget. This has brought a lot of trust to my community. And now when I say I have this project from cohealth many people get involved.*

*Bicultural worker*

BCWs and community members valued the flexibility and community-led approach as it prioritises communities' needs. There was a sense of self-determination among the community members and cohealth was seen as a reliable and trusted partner.

*Usually what a bicultural worker does is put in feedback after every session. We get asked what we need and what suggestions we have and it is planned accordingly. This helps people if they need more information about employment or if they need more information about settlement.*

*Community member*

*The bicultural worker program is set up to be so flexible for community leaders and community members to decide for themselves what is good and what they want to do. I think that's what makes such a big and important impact ... I can go back to my community leaders and ask them, okay, what could be most helpful to support our community members*

*Bicultural worker*



Through delivering community-led projects and supporting community members, bicultural workers felt that the bicultural program was central to their communities' wellbeing.

*Bicultural work is important because one can serve their community to the best of their knowledge and understanding. A bicultural worker can understand the language, and the community can express their feelings and concerns to the worker directly in their own language ... Having a bicultural worker really helps to best serve the community needs and issues.*

*Bicultural worker*

*Through cohealth projects we can see each other [community] and do our activities. When you move from one country to another, you feel like you have been taken out of your own route. Once you're in Australia and trying to start a new life from nothing, being able to see other members of your community makes you feel like you were a fish out of water and found water again. You feel this is the breath, this is the oxygen that I need in my life ... We're able to revive our traditions, the Syrian traditions. We are able to relive those precious moments that we miss dearly because of our bicultural worker and cohealth.*

*Community member*

*From the feedback that I got from the projects I can see the community is feeling safer, feeling more settled, getting to know more services here, getting to be more connected to different services. It's all positive impacts on the community.*

*Bicultural worker*



# objective three

## Build community sector capacity to work effectively with bicultural workers and facilitate engagement.

Organisations were asked questions on the following topics to understand the outcomes relating to objective three.

- Experience of engagement with cohealth's bicultural program including professional standards training, and mentoring.
- Usefulness of the resources and tools developed by the bicultural program.
- Reflections on working with bicultural workers to support engagement with multicultural communities' and improve health and wellbeing outcomes.

cohealth was described as a sectoral leader in this space. Organisations interviewed valued cohealth's leadership role. Mentorship, training, and access to cohealth resources empowered them to improve their services.

*cohealth has developed both a reputation and a set of materials and tangible support for bicultural workers. It plays a role as a leader within Melbourne, as an innovator in terms of defining the role, job descriptions, informing agencies and employers who want to use bicultural workers.*

*Sector representative*

*cohealth has really been the sectoral leader in Melbourne in relation to the deployment of bicultural workers. Our relationship has been one where we are the new guys on the block, and we are learning from cohealth about how the best way to address the challenges of having a bicultural workforce deployed to find hard to reach groups.*

*Sector representative*

*Bicultural worker program has influenced the work of the broader refugee health program in the sense that it's really provided evidence that clearly shows how valuable having a bicultural workforce is, particularly in a sector like refugee health. Utilising cohealth resources and their bicultural workers' services was central in informing best practice, including how to operate and negotiate multicultural spaces safely and carefully.*

*Sector representative*

*I think that professional standards training has been important to highlight some of the challenges that are specific and nuanced for bicultural workers. (..) The feedback I've had from the bicultural workers is it was invaluable for them to be able to draw on the information that was provided. It empowered them to push back and say, well, you know, my role is not an interpreter or my role is not this.*

*Sector representative*



*We've been taking everything in from cohealth. I'll start off with the position description. We had no idea how to craft these and what was out there. So, we were really grateful that we could access some of the position descriptions from cohealth. Obviously, we needed to contextualise that within the mental health setting and the clinical setting.*

*Sector representative*

*We've really lent on the professional standards to understand how we can create safe spaces. How do we create boundaries? How do we talk about this? How do we work with the staff so they can identify when things are going beyond their capacity, or it's starting to affect relationships with community.*

*Sector representative*

*All the agencies who've employed bicultural workers in our refugee health program have utilised those resources, whether it's the PD, policies, and procedures that they adapt or the awesome professional standards training which I also attended and found so valuable.*

*Sector representative*

Working with bicultural workers was an opportunity for the organisations interviewed to develop a nuanced understanding about the needs, strengths, interests, and perspectives of communities they work with. This meant implementing more impactful programs.

*I think it's strengthening community voice and the way we use community insights. We talk about engagement and community consultation, it's been quite two dimensional. The bicultural workforce is allowing us to really see from two lenses and hear it from two angles. The community gets an opportunity to talk to someone who understands their needs and is talking in a language that they can understand. It also allows the bicultural worker to be in an environment where they understand the other side, they understand the organisational lens and are really doing, what I consider, translating the two cultures.*

Sector representative

*I have employed bicultural workers to work alongside me in my role and I have found that it enriched my own working knowledge and capacity. I've found it very rewarding because you are open to different perspectives, different worldviews and you are challenged in your work. I've really enjoyed the different perspectives that bicultural workers will bring and as a privileged white person who's been educated and grown up in Australia, you are blind to essentially.*

Sector representative

*I think the most significant impact of the program for the sector has been highlighting with evidence that having bicultural workers embedded within your program or working alongside your staff is only going to improve how you deliver your programs, how you engage with your clients and how your clients then engage back. It builds trust, it builds rapport between the agency and the clients.*

Sector representative



Bicultural workers were considered an essential workforce to support the resettlement, health, wellbeing of communities.

*The greatest impact is really improving the health of migrant populations and connecting them with the health system here. I think that's what has been happening in the bicultural worker space within cohealth. That's one of the reasons we are thinking for a mental health point of view this is really going to be important.*

*Sector representative*


*I really believe that this is an important workforce that we need to invest more in and look at the ways that this would help people's overall health and healthcare delivery... I think what cohealth has been doing over the years has really been important to build that workforce and highlight for people from migrant populations that regardless of where you come from, regardless of where you are at, you will always have access to care.*

*Sector representative*


*As you might know, mental health systems are very complex health systems. They're very difficult sometimes for people to engage. They become even more difficult if you're someone from a culturally diverse background. We realised that we could utilise bicultural workers both in promotion and prevention but also in assisting people in their recovery journey as they navigate the mental health system.*

*Sector representative*

# key learnings




cohealth’s bicultural program developed, mentored, and empowered interns with skills, networks, and confidence to work as bicultural workers and facilitated employment opportunities.



cohealth bicultural workers felt supported by the program, valued the opportunities provided through group supervision, peer support and reflective practice.




Community-led projects delivered by bicultural workers created an opportunity for communities to self-determine and were positively perceived in the community.



Bicultural workers are crucial in supporting communities’ settlement, health, and wellbeing. They increased awareness about rights, opportunities, and support services.



Organisations value and continuously utilise cohealth’s resources, including bicultural workers, to be able to navigate and undertake their initiatives in a culturally safe way when working with multicultural communities.



cohealth’s resources have enriched organisations’ understanding of workplace dynamics that affect bicultural workers including issues of cultural safety, race-based discrimination, and privileged knowledge.



# recommendations

The most common recommendation from all interviewees was about sustainable funding. Insecure funding negatively affects employment of BCWs and program continuity. Many cohealth bicultural workers are casually employed, and their projects are only funded short term, this creates suspicion in the community about the reliability of bicultural workers and their programs. Sustainable and ongoing funding was a recurring suggestion.

*The biggest challenge is having short block funding where bicultural workers are employed for six months or three months and then there's no certainty after that. Whereas we can see the impact is positive and definitely leads to better health outcomes for our communities and our ways of working. But it's very difficult to keep that momentum, and sustain that when you haven't got sustainable and ongoing funding.*

*Sector representative*

The need to invest more in bicultural workers to expand the services to other sectors was suggested as crucial to enhance output, while at the same time, increasing visibility in the areas they currently work in.

*My advice to cohealth in terms of its leadership to support bicultural workers is that it has a role now with government and with other agencies whereby it must be listened to. And I think it would be good if cohealth could speak loudly and clearly to the government and say we exist. We're a workforce that you should take seriously. You should invest in us.*

*Bicultural worker*

# conclusion

In conclusion, the cohealth Bicultural Program has shown significant success in connecting communities, empowering bicultural workers (BCWs), and improving the health and wellbeing of refugee and asylum seeker communities. Its focus on culture, language, and community connections has led to tangible improvements in various areas.

The program's goals were successfully met, with BCWs excelling in each aspect. Through internships and jobs, the program has boosted BCWs' skills and confidence, enabling them to lead community projects. These efforts have not only boosted health outcomes but also empowered communities to take charge of their needs.

A key strength is the program's recognition of BCWs' role in bridging gaps between communities and organisations. By offering training, resources, and mentorship, the program has created valuable partnerships across various sectors and enhanced cultural competency within these organisations.

However, challenges remain, notably sustainable funding that affects BCWs' roles and projects. Solving this issue is vital for long-term success.

In summary, the program should strive for sustained funding, advocate for greater recognition and support, and continue to foster strong partnerships between BCWs and various sectors. By doing so, the program will continue to contribute significantly to the wellbeing of diverse communities and serve as a model for effective community-led initiatives in the future.





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thankyou