

KAREN COMMUNITY PROJECT

“ We don't want to be the next Taskforce ”

Access to Justice Community Leaders
Consultation Summary Report



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Hser Law La Nay Blut, Sherinald Shwe and voices from the Karen
community in Melbourne's West.

Background

The Karen community seeks a coordinated strategy to address community safety and youth justice issues, enhancing understanding of the system and available support services.

Community leaders came together to ensure that a wide range of community members could participate through meaningful engagement and consultation sessions with the various Karen community groups in the West.

Who we talked to

We prioritized leaders who worked with the most vulnerable community members, especially those at higher risk of criminal justice involvement or with limited access to existing services. All demographics listed below were included in our sample. These included:

- Young people
- Youth leaders
- Community Leaders
- Faith-based and religious leaders
- Community Elders
- People with lived experience of the justice system
- Culturally and racially marginalised women
- People from refugee and migrant backgrounds
- Families
- People with a disability
- People who speak English as their second or third language
- People with Neuro-diverse needs

Who is involved?

Community leaders from across 14 Karen community-based organisations came together from February 2025 to discuss strategies to ensure community safety and cohesion. Listed below are the 14 Karen community – based organisations across Melbourne’s West.

1. Australian Karen Organisation Victoria Branch (AKOV)
2. Australian Karen Organisation Victoria Branch Youth Department (AKOVYD)
3. Australian Karen Preserving Promoting Cultural & History Association Inc. (AKP)
4. Comfort Care and Community Service
5. Hill Light Church
6. Karuna Compassion in Action
7. Melbourne Karen Baptist Church (MKBC)
8. Melbourne Karen Buddhist Association (MKBA)
9. Pwo Karen Baptist Church
10. Shepherd Centre Church
11. St Stephen’s Anglican Church- Karen Authorised Congregation
12. Werribee Karen Baptist Church (WKBC)
13. Westgate Karen Baptist Community Church (WKBCC)
14. Werribee Karen Seventh-Day Adventist Church

What we heard

The overall theme to emerge throughout the consultation based on the need of the community is:

- Access and Equity
- Informed and Participation/Ownership
- Rights and Information
- Community Safety and Respect
- Economic and Social Connection
- Community Voice and Representation

Barriers for community

The Karen community identified the following barriers to seeking help:

- Need for culturally responsive services and better service coordination
- Low language and legal literacy
- Impact of war, torture, trauma, and family separation
- Lack of access to health care information and legal rights
- These things negatively affect mental health and wellbeing
- Many people missed out on early intensive settlement support, which could've helped
- There are gaps in resettlement services particularly the restrictions and set timeframe that services can provide assistance

What community need

While this project began with a focus on justice, community consultation revealed a broader set of interconnected needs including housing options, drug and alcohol services, mental health support, disability services, and culturally appropriate early intervention and prevention programs for young people and their families in a timely manner

Community and young people want opportunities to include:

- Access education and training that includes mentorship with people from their cultural background.
- Have sustainable and fair employment opportunities where people feel safe at work.
- Community wants to be treated with respect and dignity, have security and opportunity to lead a better life
- Have a safe, secure home where young people and their families can thrive.
- Be safe and protected to use healthcare, public transport and other services.
- Connect and engage with family, friends and the local community in ways that they want.
- Cultural appropriate support to deal with personal crises such as ill health, mental health or interacting with the justice system.
- Be heard and influence decisions that affect them.

Recommendations

1. Access & Equity

To enhance access and equity for the Karen community, a coordinated, culturally responsive approach is necessary.

2. Information and Participation/Ownership

Engaging communities in the design and implementation of services and programs is essential to fostering trust, building ownership, improving outcomes, and ensuring that decisions align with community needs and values

3. Rights and Information

Increase community accessibility and awareness of existing services and the law through production and dissemination of information through Community Legal Education (CLE), printed material and online.

4. Community Safety and Respect

Community safety and respect for community, women and young people involves a combination of governmental, services, community, and individual actions aimed at ensuring people are safe, their rights are protected, and they are integrated into the community with dignity and opportunity

5. Economic and Social Connection

The Karen community are more likely to access services that are co-located at community hubs, where they can connect with a full range of supports such as food banks, casework, legal services, family services, and social groups.

6. Community Voice and Representation

Invest in community and bi-cultural workers, to ensure that services remain accessible and culturally safe, and to guarantee that any programs or services remain a viable employment option for the community.

Limitations

- Project Leads are currently evaluating strategies to better engage underrepresented demographics, particularly individuals under 18 years old, who are statistically more likely to interact with the criminal justice system.
- To date, neither relevant services nor the Victorian Government have conducted consultations with the Karen community when developing youth justice approaches for young people and their families from this cultural background.
- Securing an appropriate venue for the project launch posed significant challenges for the community.
- Phase 1 of the project relied solely on community capacity and volunteerism for both planning and implementation.

Sponsorship

We would like to express our sincere gratitude on behalf of the Karen Community Project to the 14 Karen community and faith-based organisations, as well as to our generous donors and local Karen business sponsors. We are profoundly grateful for their invaluable support. We would like to acknowledge the following individuals and business:

1. A & P Bricklaying
2. Aye Driving School
3. Paw Driving School
4. Tai Yin Thar
5. Comfort Care & Community Services
6. Poekoothay
7. Kaw Thoo Lei Shop
8. Kay Say Bricklaying
9. Tree Shade Supports
10. Pay Ther Pu Karen Ethnic Clothing
11. LCKELECTRICAL.PTY.LTD
12. Mr Law Baw Law Mu
13. Universe Karen Grocery
14. G & G Virities Grocery PTY.LTD
15. Emmanuella Auto Repairs
16. Living Hope Community Care Pty.Ltd
17. Zun Nal Driving School

Next steps

We will seek funding to progress to Phase 2 of the project, which will focus on mapping community-led solutions and innovative outcomes that enhance community safety, social cohesion, and overall wellbeing through further community consultations. Community groups will be actively involved throughout the project, co-designing the services they want and need within a culturally safe, fit-for-purpose service delivery model.

Project Contacts

If community members, organisations, service providers, or government representatives have questions or feedback about this project, please contact the project representatives and email listed below. We welcome opportunities for collaboration and partnership to help advance our goals and break down barriers in supporting our community, young people, and their families.



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