

CONNECTING COMMUNITIES 2022–2024

SUMMARY PROJECT
EVALUATION REPORT

JUNE 2025

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF TRADITIONAL OWNERS

Acknowledgement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

Safe and Equal, Multicultural Centre for Women's Health and WLK Consulting are based on Wurundjeri Country. We acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as the traditional and ongoing custodians of the lands on which we live and work, and we pay respects to Elders past and present. We acknowledge that sovereignty has never been ceded, and recognise First Nations peoples' rights to self-determination and continuing connections to land, waters and community.



Connecting Communities is supported by the Victorian Government

ABOUT THE PROJECT AND ITS EVALUATION

Connecting Communities 2022–2024 (*Connecting Communities*, the Project) was a stand-alone program of learning and support for practitioners working with Victorian multicultural and/or faith-based communities to address family violence. The Project comprised a number of activities that offered professionals a structured network for connection, collaboration, collective care and learning. Network participation was open to the workforce generated by the Victorian Government Department of Families, Fairness and Housing (DFFH) Supporting Multicultural and Faith Communities to Prevent Family Violence Grant Program (Grant Program). Two specialist organisations in Multicultural Centre for Women's Health (MCWH) and Safe and Equal partnered for *Connecting Communities*, and maintained purposeful ways of working that were safe, equitable and respectful from Project inception (January 2022) to final deliverables (October 2024).

The evaluation process for *Connecting Communities* commenced in September 2022 and engaged the Project Team at all stages of the evaluation, including in design workshops, the creation and use of evaluation tools, and the development of a final evaluation report on which this summary Project evaluation report is based. The purpose of the evaluation was to:

- capture the successes and lessons learned from the design and implementation of *Connecting Communities* 2022–2024;
- determine the value of the Project as experienced by those involved, among them the grant recipient organisations (i.e., individuals participating in the network) and the partner organisations in MCWH and Safe and Equal;
- draw conclusions about the Project and its partnership approach to workforce development, including their contribution to the evidence base; and
- make strategic recommendations on 'what next' for workforce development in the context of current Victorian prevention policy.

With the evaluation completed, the partners now intend to share Project and partnership successes and lessons learned and advocate for effective partnership approaches to workforce development going forward. This summary Project evaluation report is part of their shared endeavour.

Connecting Communities was funded by DFFH with Family Safety Victoria (FSV) as the administering branch of the Department.

OUTPUTS AND REACH

'AT A GLANCE'

The following table summarises the Project's main outputs along with some relevant reach figures.

PROJECT ACTIVITIES	OUTPUTS AND REACH
Activity 1. Partnering and action learning	<p>A formal partnership brokering process including</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The development and yearly review of a Partnership Agreement • Partnership Brokers Training (in person) for 3 staff members connected to the Project • Consistent and documented partnership quarterly check ins
Activity 2. Workforce capability building	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 x foundational needs assessment; 1 x process for ongoing needs assessments • 1 x tailored offering of Prevention in Practice two-day online training course, Oct and Nov 2022. Total participant attendance across both days: 13 • 6 x online thematic practice workshops across 2023. Total participant attendance across all sessions: 97. Topics included: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Intersectionality in practice ◦ Transforming 'cultural' resistance ◦ Migrant men and masculinities ◦ Lessons from Aboriginal-led prevention ◦ Cultural safety in evaluation ◦ Wellbeing and collective care • 6 x <i>Connecting Communities</i> resources to support prevention or early intervention work with multicultural and/or faith communities
Activity 3. Workforce connections	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 4 x <i>Connecting Communities</i> CoPs, with sessions focused on topics important to participants e.g., engaging men, reflective practice, communicating prevention. Total participants: 57 • 3 x <i>Connecting Communities</i> events. Total attendees: 107 • 1 x Project HelpDesk • Monthly e-bulletins since Aug 2022 – Oct 2024: 22 issues and 87 subscribers • 1 x electronic practice network (Basecamp) with 89 subscribers • 1 x panel at PreventX (conference) in Mar 2024 with 241 attendees • 1 x panel at 'Together, Connecting' (forum) in Jun 2024 with 98 attendees
Activity 4. Project-level evaluation	<p>A comprehensive Project evaluation process including in-person evaluation design workshops involving both partners; a Project Logic Model and Evaluation Plan; fit-for-purpose data collection tools; and regular meetings between the Project team and Evaluator</p>

Table 1. *Connecting Communities* activities and outputs 'at a glance'

SELECTED FINDINGS ARISING FROM THE EVALUATION

A snapshot of the main evaluation findings are presented in this summary Project evaluation report.



The partnership model was decided partly to balance power, that idea of Safe and Equal being the organisation holding the contract with the funder but wanting to deliberately co-deliver and platform MCWH's work and expertise. We also saw the partnership process as a way to help manage issues around capacity or staff turnover. To have that platform to talk about things like risk and quality. These were conscious discussions very early on. The creating of the container for the partnership.

(CONNECTING COMMUNITIES TEAM MEMBER)

A PURPOSEFUL AND EQUITABLE PARTNERSHIP SET THE FOUNDATIONS FOR SUCCESS

From 2021 to 2024, the Grant Program was the means for growing a critical segment of Victoria's prevention workforce to better address family violence experienced by multicultural and/or faith communities. MCWH and Safe and Equal undertook *Connecting Communities* as a peer-based program of professional learning and development for this workforce. They also viewed the network as a wrap-around program of activities for building connection and community among participants. When it came to meeting the unique needs of the Grant Program workforce, a single-strategy approach (such as one-off training) simply would not do.

This purposeful take on workforce development directed MCWH and Safe and Equal towards purposeful ways of working together. They established partnering and action learning as Project activities in their own right, and committed to a process of partnering properly ahead of any significant contact with practitioners as the

intended workforce to be supported by the Project. The partners felt that this considered approach was especially important to keep in check power imbalances that might otherwise creep into a partnership like theirs, between a mainstream peak body (Safe and Equal) and a grassroots multicultural community-based organisation (MCWH). Left unchecked, such imbalances could have ripple effects all the way to Project deliverables, resulting in poorer learning and support outcomes for network participants.

The effort that went into this planned approach to partnership resulted in a Partnership Agreement as the guiding light for how the partners intended to work together for the entirety of the Project. The evaluation found that this structured and resourced approach had positive experiential benefits to the Project Team and the two partner organisations, as well as to individual professional trajectories. Most importantly, this approach set the foundations for Project success, especially in maintaining informed program adaptiveness to the emerging learning and support needs of network participants – something that the team excelled at.



There was no way we could have done this Project without the partnership. Workforce capacity building is really important, and we believe that more can and should be done in terms of particular settings or particular communities. We thought a wrap-around capability development program would be good, and we also knew that there was no way we could (or wanted to) do this alone. So, then the question became how can our two organisations work collaboratively?

(CONNECTING COMMUNITIES TEAM MEMBER)

EXTRA WORKSHOPS WERE A NECESSARY AND WORTHWHILE INCLUSION.

A significant program adaptation occurred during the Project's second year, and concerned the series of thematic practice workshops. The workshops were co-facilitated by MCWH and Safe and Equal, and were developed and delivered in lieu of foundational level, full day trainings.

As the Project entered its second year, the team was increasingly aware of the existing capabilities of the Grant Program workforce and the foundational knowledge and skills many participants already possessed. Participants were skilled in building relationships, for instance; and in community engagement and community development. Their practices were strengths-based, and they worked with trauma informed principles. They came with know-how in translating or transliterating approaches and concepts found in frameworks like *Change the story* and *Intersectionality Matters: A guide to engaging immigrant and refugee communities to prevent violence against women*, to make them relevant to their communities. They had real-world experience of community resistance to challenging the intersecting structural drivers of violence, and an appreciation of how such resistance can be located within a wider social context.

The Project Team observed, listened, heard and reflected. Members then trusted and backed each other to adapt the program's design and include the additional thematic practice workshops. Data

collected through participant feedback forms showed that this decision was the right one to make. An overwhelming majority of respondents either strongly agreed or agreed with a number of statements related to the high quality of the workshops, and the positive impact on their knowledge, awareness, skills and confidence. In short, the evaluation found that the workshops were a great fit for the learning and support needs of network participants, and that they gave practitioners valuable opportunities to connect as a community of like-minded learners when little by way of curated opportunities like these existed for them as a unique part of the prevention workforce.

The themes were so relevant to the work we're doing. I know MCWH and Safe and Equal thought very carefully about including themes that mirror our work. It was also a great opportunity for us to hear from one another and learn strategies. To break through some tough issues or get answers to questions in an environment when everybody is so like-minded. That was the beauty of it.

(CONNECTING COMMUNITIES NETWORK MEMBER)

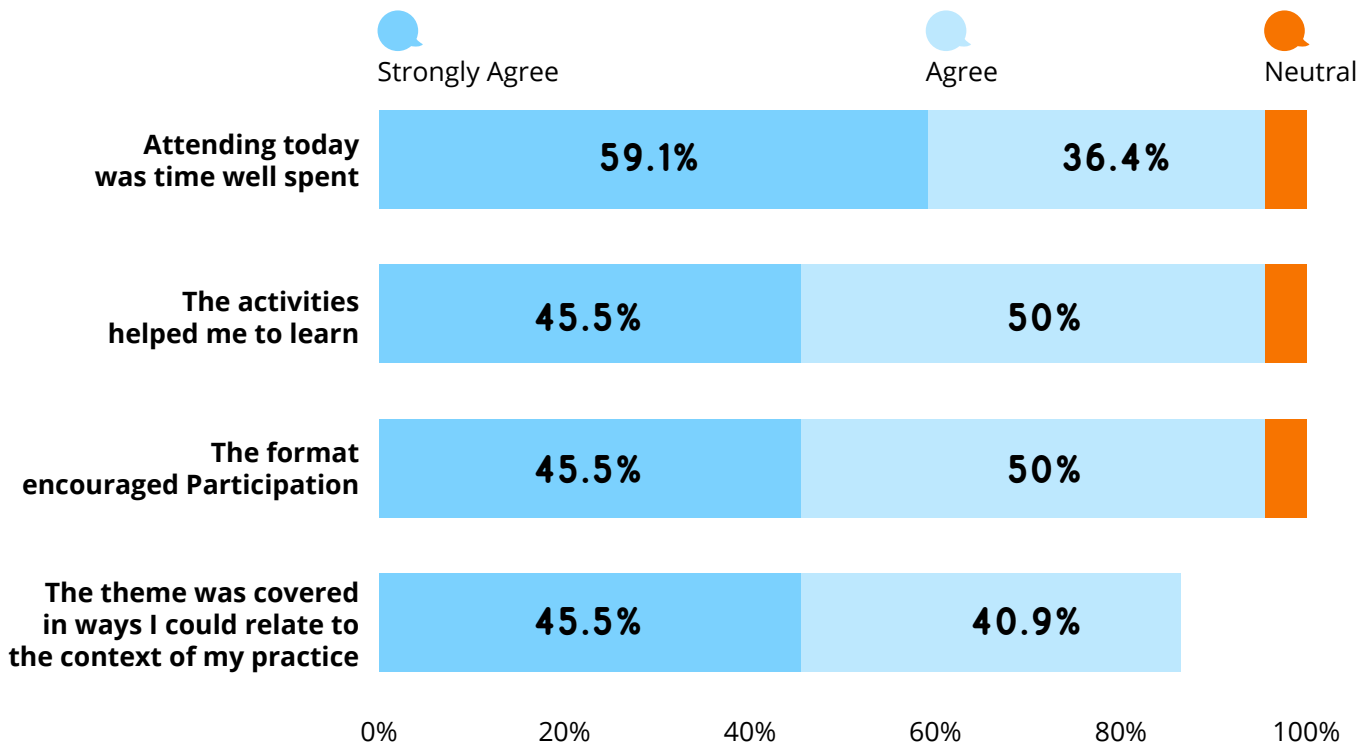


Chart 1. Participant experience of the thematic practice workshops: Per cent of respondents who strongly agreed or agreed with the statements



As someone from a culturally and linguistically diverse background, I often feel a 'dominant culture' lens is placed on most training in spite of acknowledgement of diversity. This workshop was possibly the first time I've really felt there was true understanding and respect for people outside of the dominant culture. The case study was a case in point. It showed that when people label things as resistance, what's actually needed is to genuinely listen and be community led.

(CONNECTING COMMUNITIES NETWORK MEMBER)

PRACTITIONERS LEANED ON EACH OTHER AND FOUND VALIDATION, STRENGTH AND SOLIDARITY.

Communities of Practice (CoPs) have been a mainstay of primary prevention workforce capability building in Victoria for almost two decades. Safe and Equal has been part of this, having delivered CoPs with and for different parts of the workforce as far back as 2007. It's no surprise that MCWH and Safe and Equal planned CoPs to be a core component of *Connecting Communities* from the outset.

Like the workshops, CoPs had to be responsive to the needs of the Grant Program workforce. In planning the CoPs, the Project Team gave special consideration to the employment realities of practitioners. The team was aware that workers were often employed by their organisations in part-time and time-limited roles to undertake funded community-led prevention and/or early intervention initiatives; and that for some, their family violence role was additional to a number of other roles they held in their organisations. The team knew that engagement could be potentially weakened by organisational constraints to support the participation of workers regardless of the strength of any individual's desire to be involved.



As time goes by attendance drops because people get super busy. CoPs are things that can drop off quickly, people start sacrificing. I certainly felt this, even though I attended quite a few. I don't know what the solution is to make them 'bang for buck.' There's a balance that needs to be struck between that and deep thought and care, which was definitely the priority of the facilitators.

(CONNECTING COMMUNITIES NETWORK MEMBER)

A number of strategies were identified and implemented by the Project Team such as providing schedules early on to assure practitioners that attending would be time well spent; and offering the CoPs on different days of the week to give those in part-time roles or those holding multiple roles in their organisation some options to attend the sessions. Despite this attention and care, attendance numbers across the CoPs did decline over time. The barriers to ongoing attendance simply became too great for some practitioners as their own initiatives progressed.

That said, the evaluation found that those who did stay connected with the CoPs were highly satisfied with the sessions as safe spaces for learning. They reported that the sessions were a source of encouragement and validation for their work, and a source of strength and solidarity too. In these ways, the CoPs functioned as the means for collective care. And for isolated practitioners, the sessions were a professional lifeline.

A lot of us are the only ones working in prevention in our organisations. Sometimes we're working on prevention and there's an element of response that needs to be done too. We're able to lean on each other through the CoP. We're able to create channels to stay in touch afterwards. I think the biggest learning is on the common experience. The struggle is universal. It's given me a sense of solidarity; and in times when I've felt like giving up, perhaps even the strength to continue.

(CONNECTING COMMUNITIES NETWORK MEMBER)

PROJECT RESOURCES AND EVENTS GENUINELY CENTRED, ELEVATED AND AMPLIFIED THE PRACTITIONER VOICE.

Resource development was part of the Project's connection-building components. In developing Project resources, the team again adopted a stance that was facilitative rather than authoritative, taking steps to centre the practitioner experience and platform practitioner insights in ways that did not co-opt the expertise and leadership being demonstrated to them with such openness and trust throughout the network.

The team's interactions and conversations with participants through the CoPs, thematic practice workshops and other engagement channels thoroughly informed the resources developed. Challenges faced by practitioners in their work, and the expertise, skills and leadership shown by them in overcoming hurdles, shaped the content areas for each resource. Each resource focused on a different aspect of real-world practitioner experience and effective strategies for working with communities on prevention or early intervention; each resource spotlighted the capabilities and strengths inherent in the network, allowing these to shine. The result was a series of six high-quality resources, summarised as follows.

PROJECT RESOURCES AND FOCUS AREAS	Release date	Downloads
<i>Connecting Communities Network Directory.</i> Designed exclusively for the network. A high-level overview of grant recipient organisations and their projects, plus an annotated catalogue of materials relevant to their work.	Sept 2023	N/A
<i><u>Improving our Approach to Community-led Prevention.</u></i> Lessons from the <i>Connecting Communities</i> program to help improve our understanding and practice of multicultural or faith-based community-led prevention. Includes considerations for intersectional prevention with multicultural and/or faith-based communities.	Feb 2024	427
<i><u>Communicating for Connection.</u></i> A practice guide on how values-based messaging is a powerful tool that helps connect the hopes and dreams of communities with the prevention of family and gender-based violence.	Mar 2024	853
<i><u>Engaging Men from Multicultural and Faith-based Communities.</u></i> Lessons from the <i>Connecting Communities</i> program to help bring men into primary prevention in ways that are productive i.e., that do not reinforce harmful ideas about power, gender (especially masculinity) and/or specific cultures.	Jun 2024	336
<i><u>Supporting Wellbeing for Prevention Practitioners.</u></i> Lessons from the <i>Connecting Communities</i> program to help embed considerations of practitioner wellbeing into the primary prevention system and positively influence how workers are valued, supported and sustained.	Jul 2024	189
<i><u>Together for Impact.</u></i> A deep dive into the partnership between MCWH and Safe and Equal that was foundational to <i>Connecting Communities 2022–2024</i>	Oct 2024	127

Table 2. Project resources and approximate downloads as at December 2024



We don't have many resources or materials for multicultural communities. This resource was a milestone, a vital resource that's been created. We've become more aware of who's doing what, the contact details. It's a small initiative, and we definitely need more tools, but it's very important.

(CONNECTING COMMUNITIES NETWORK MEMBER)

Meanwhile, Project events in September 2023 and July 2024, together with a dedicated *Connecting Communities* panel at PreventX in March 2024, served to elevate and amplify the voices of the network, both across the network and beyond it. PreventX, for instance, included network participants as an expert panel, and afforded the Project an occasion to launch the resource, *Communicating for Connection*. The panellists shared important intersectional practice insights on topics such as backlash and resistance. As one speaker put it, 'What's most important when engaging with communities is going with them, not at them.' The panel is available to view on demand on the Safe and Equal website.

CASE STUDY: Connection and community in the spotlight

“As the Evaluator walking alongside *Connecting Communities*, I had the privilege of being quite connected to the Project throughout its implementation. Many times, I felt like an ‘honorary’ member of the team. During our regular catch ups, I’d hear about the intentional steps being taken by the partners to recognise power imbalances and practise power sharing at all times. I’d hear about how this was modelling good practices to the network, in showing that a mainstream organisation and a grassroots community-based organisation can partner with respect and equity, and that expertise can be centred rather than extracted or even worse, co-opted. I’d read about all this too, in documents like annual progress reports to the funder:



It’s about role modelling and leading with ethical collaborative partnerships. It feels like we are showing the way. Network participants have noticed this too. They’ve said that our co-facilitation creates a safe, comfortable environment that has clearly avoided unsafe power dynamics. They’ve shared with us that MCWH and Safe and Equal have role modelled good partnership practices and created safe environments where they feel comfortable to share their experiences. That’s the flow on effect of our intentional approach to partnering.

(PROGRESS REPORT TO FUNDER, APRIL 2024).

It wasn’t until the Project’s final event in July 2024, ‘*Connecting Communities: Around the table*’ that I got to observe this power sharing first hand, and experience its positive impacts on the community of practitioners who had gathered together on the day.

The event started with the co-facilitators from MCWH and Safe and Equal standing side by side. They introduced the theme of storytelling by sharing stories of their own migrant families and communities ‘to open up and ground the day.’ This was important for two reasons. First, it demonstrated that the format of the event was not going to be a mainstream format, with a panel showcasing successes. Rather, we would all share insights through storytelling as a device for knowledge exchange; we would all centre storytelling as a way to build evidence; we would all connect with each other through the act of exchanging stories. Second, it diminished the distance that is normally in place between facilitators and participants. Power differences in the room were minimised and even extinguished. We were all equalised in that space of sharing and connecting as one, as a community of many communities of like-minded people and natural storytellers.

If this was what the network had been like over the last two years, then I finally got to see and feel it first-hand. I remember thinking how great it must have been for participants to have had this network and opportunities to be included in exchanges like ‘*Connecting Communities: Around the table*.’”

OVERALL SUCCESSES AND VALUE TO PARTICIPANTS

Connecting Communities was a successful demonstration of how to co-create and co-deliver a safe and meaningful network of learning and support for a vital portion of Victoria's prevention workforce. Foundational to this core success was a fit-for-purpose partnership that fostered equity and power sharing between MCWH and Safe and Equal as system leads in primary prevention, and supported the application of intersectional principles and practices to the network at all times. When equity is front of mind and power dynamics are constantly examined between partners, then there is much less chance of transactional or extractive 'tick-a-box' diversity encounters being repeated elsewhere i.e., in program delivery components.

What does it mean to partner with a grassroots organisation that works with migrant and refugee women? What does race and racism look like in primary prevention, and how does this play out in our partnership? And how do we address all of that through the Partnership Agreement? I think this questioning also created an authorising environment for us to talk about race and racism when interacting with the Network.

(CONNECTING COMMUNITIES TEAM MEMBER)

For me, a big insight is to allocate funding to partnerships as an activity in and of itself. Put time into partnerships at the start. We had six months of partnership work before implementation began. That's groundbreaking. Safe and Equal fought for this, MCWH too. Build Connecting Communities as three phases. Partner. Deliver. Evaluate. So, the insight is about changing funding mindsets on partnerships.

(CONNECTING COMMUNITIES TEAM MEMBER)

If the network hadn't existed, it would have impacted me. I'm not in a service where I can get information or experience from other prevention practitioners. I needed the network. Not having it would have impacted me a lot.

(CONNECTING COMMUNITIES NETWORK MEMBER)

Other ways that the Project held value to participants was in consistently generating positive experiences of connection and community, and in consistently generating positive impacts on practitioner knowledge, skills, confidence, as evidenced via returned feedback forms and other ways of providing feedback to the Project Team. The evaluation also determined the Project's value through the concept of the counterfactual. What would have happened to practitioners if the network hadn't been available to them? What would have happened if MCWH and Safe and Equal hadn't been funded to co-create and co-facilitate a program for workforce connection, collaboration, collective care and learning?

These questions were put to participants involved in focus groups for the evaluation. Their answers support a view of the network as essential to professional practice and practitioner wellbeing.

If the network hadn't been in place:

- many would have struggled alone without knowing what it felt like to have the care and support of peers, or to have that sense of solidarity and collective endeavour that is part and parcel of the movement to end family and gender-based violence;
- some might have taken it upon themselves to seek professional development or learning opportunities without necessarily having their learning or support needs identified, let alone met;
- others would have missed out on timely access to emerging evidence and tools especially if located in regional Victoria, where it can take a bit longer for the latest information to arrive, or in organisations where they are the only ones doing prevention work.

NEXT STEPS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

MCWH and Safe and Equal commissioned the evaluation of *Connecting Communities* and built evaluation into the Project as a core activity. These two partners are the primary intended users of the findings and conclusions contained in this evaluation report.

At the time of finalising this report (December 2024) the partners had just received news of an extension of funding for *Connecting Communities* – albeit at a reduced level compared to prior years – that will take the Project to June 2025. This next phase of *Connecting Communities* is to align with funding extensions awarded to Grant Program recipients too.

National frameworks like *Change the story* and statewide policies like *Building from Strength* tell us that the long-term endeavour of primary prevention demands a dedicated and coordinated system, and that a skilled, expert, multidisciplinary and diverse workforce – not to mention a supported, connected and collaborative workforce – is an integral piece of the infrastructure for intersectional practice. Yet, stop-start and short-term funding models endure as the typical way to fund prevention, as was (and is) the case for *Connecting Communities* and recipients of the Grant Program. While these models do lead to more practitioners in prevention work at specific points in time, they are unlikely to support or sustain the workforce or infrastructure at the scale required to realise the long-term vision of communities that are free from violence.



***What needs to be different next time?
To have multicultural, refugee and
faith-based communities
supported for community-led
prevention work outside of the
short-term grant process. And
for accessible connection and
development programs for
workers to continue alongside.***

(CONNECTING COMMUNITIES TEAM MEMBER)

Connecting Communities therefore presents strong opportunities for MCWH and Safe and Equal to take the lead in shared advocacy to shift the ways prevention, intersectional practice and workforce capability building are typically funded. It also presents opportunities to continue their journeys in building the capacity of their own organisations for more equitable and respectful partnership processes – whether these partnerships exist for workforce capability building and primary prevention initiatives, or indeed for other organisational priority or program areas. The following recommendations arising from the evaluation of *Connecting Communities* 2022–2024 are made with these considerations and opportunities in mind.

RECOMMENDATION 1

MCWH and Safe and Equal should endeavour to continue maintaining the *Connecting Communities* partnership through formal review processes. This will ensure that the partnership continues to be fit-for-purpose for the remainder of the Project, and that the cross-organisational team continues to be well-supported for the high-quality intersectional workforce development practices and activities that have characterised *Connecting Communities* to date.

RECOMMENDATION 2

MCWH and Safe and Equal should take opportunities for joint advocacy that can help to change the stop-start, short-term models typically used to fund primary prevention, intersectional practice and workforce capability building.

RECOMMENDATION 3

MCWH and Safe and Equal should continue with their endeavours to build the capacities of their respective organisations for more equitable and respectful partnership processes in workforce capability building and primary prevention, or indeed in other organisational priority or program areas, by sharing and promoting the positive partnership processes and outcomes of *Connecting Communities*.

RECOMMENDATION 4

MCWH and Safe and Equal should publicly share this summary Project evaluation report to help facilitate the strategic advocacy and the capacity building endeavours recommended above. Publicly releasing this report could also help to grow the prevention field more widely, through evidence sharing on partnerships and workforce capability building, and in demonstrating the value of undertaking evaluation as a core activity of programs or projects from the outset.

MCWH and Safe and Equal are committed to fulfilling as many of the recommendations in this report as possible, and ensuring the wisdom, connections and deepened practice built and shared through *Connecting Communities*, as well as the partnership, is embedded into both organisations. After nearly three years of working directly with practitioners at the forefront of community-led, intersectional primary prevention in Victoria, the Project Team has seen firsthand the value of tailored, practice focussed capability building activities for multicultural and faith-based prevention practitioners that centres and elevates their expertise. MCWH and Safe and Equal hope to see workforce development of this nature continue to be resourced and supported into the future.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report, and the evaluation on which it is based, could not have been possible without the input and guidance of staff from MCWH and Safe and Equal who have been connected to *Connecting Communities* 2022–2024, including members of the cross-organisational Project Team. Thanks go to the following people for their engagement with different parts of the evaluation process from design to implementation to write up, and for coordinating and contributing towards focus groups: Meghan Cooper, Sangwon Lee, Aurore Delcourt, Nisha Liyanage, Louella Villadiego-Logge, Amelia Ditcham, Lucy Peckham, Jaspreet Kaur and Naomi Taranto.

Thank you to all the network participants who took part in the evaluation's focus groups and who diligently completed and returned online feedback forms and offered feedback in other ways. We hope you can all see your perspectives reflected in these pages.

Thank you to Wei Leng Kwok, WLK Consulting, who led the evaluation and was the author of the full report on which this summary report is based.