

Responding with compassion

- [Najma Sambul](#)
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Panicked, anxious and without proper information, the residents of nine public housing estates in Flemington, North Melbourne and Kensington were put into a 'hard lockdown'. The government scrambled to contain the inclining and alarming positive cases of COVID-19. Residents paid a harsh price under these restrictions. They had no time to prepare. Their dignity as human beings was not prioritised. Key community organisations in the area were not consulted.



Despite this, the Australian Muslims Social Services Agency centre located across the North Melbourne public housing estates, swiftly came to the aid of the community, opening the mosque doors to the wider community. Donations flooded the centre. Volunteers from across Melbourne arrived ready to support any way they could. Key volunteers came from Carlton and surrounding suburbs, mostly young African people were on the frontlines. They had used social media to reach out to friends, relatives and others locked in the housing estates to ask what they needed and then got to work.

When I arrived on day one, I was astonished by how organised and efficient the volunteers were. Some of the meals that were provided by The Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), were circulated online by residents. Many non-perishable foods had perished. This food was well past the use by date. Meal packs had still not been delivered to the 3000 residents, who were hungry and anxiously waiting for any information on what would happen next.

AMSSA centre, largely headed by the youth faction prepared adequate meals and supply packs. These packages included fresh produce, culturally appropriate meals (halal), and essentials like, baby formula, nappies and female hygiene products. Volunteers walked across from the AMSSA centre armed with bags of food and delivered them to the foyer of the apartment blocks. This continued for hours.

Car loads of donations were taken down the road to the Flemington housing estates and Kensington. From their apartments residents waved down at volunteers, a show of gratitude. The residents who had become prisoners in their own homes, denied the four essential reasons that other lockdown suburbs received, were not forgotten by their community.

The obstacles faced by volunteers were disheartening and frustrating. The intimidating police presence, who have a strained relationship with the residents stemming from years of over policing, harassment and racial discrimination in the area was a great concern. A public health crisis fronted by police officers was a tense environment to be working under. Yet, the volunteers continued to deliver.

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The hardest obstacle to overcome was misinformation and conflicting information from government agencies. I asked DHHS workers how food would be given to the residents — they didn't know. I asked the police the same question — they didn't know. It was a logistical nightmare that only got worse. We understood this would be a difficult task for the government to coordinate, but getting supplies to residents was like navigating a minefield. Volunteers would be stopped by different agency representatives and asked to provide evidence of DHHS clearance. Other times they were simply let through. These concerns were brought up to the relevant government departments in consultation calls. The willingness of the community organisations to liaise with the government was a tremendous effort, if only it had been reciprocated at the beginning of the hard lockdown.

Currently, the community has used these conversations with the government to assist the residents. After four days a smoother system has come into effect; where there are clear guidelines and protocols for organisations, so they have the ability to help without added barriers. A community led and run call centre has been established to give the residents the right to access information.

East African Women's foundation, the organisation I am part of, helped elderly Somali women and those most at risk. We received distressed calls from women known to us, we worry for their mental health, as with all the residents. The community and community organisations stepped in when the government hadn't.

As much as there is to celebrate, this is bittersweet. The government failed the residents, in more ways than one. There are suggestions that the complacency of people living in public housing estates are to blame for such a harsh reaction. This is wrong, the community takes this pandemic very seriously. It is our vulnerable that we want to protect most. The pandemic should be led by compassion and empathy. The government should look to AMSSA and take note, this is how you respond to a public health crisis.



Najma Sambul is a Somali-Australian writer. She writes both non fiction and fiction, but is adamant fiction writing still has a future. She has a number of unpublished short stories and a half completed comedy screenplay on her laptop. She remains optimistic about their future.

Main image: AMSSA volunteers (AAP Image/James Ross)

Taken from Eureka Street