

Submission to Independent Accountability Panel Sydney Alliance- Voices for Power

The Sydney Alliance brings together diverse community organisations, unions and religious organisations to advance the common good and achieve a fair, just and sustainable city. Beginning 3 years ago, the Voices for Power Campaign is a community organising campaign that brings together diverse cultural and religious communities to create a future with 'clean and affordable energy for all'. Below is a submission on behalf of our campaign leaders (volunteers) that will speak to our campaign's four core values; accessibility, affordability, community engagement and sustainability.

Submission Accessibility

Everyone wants to be able to pay their bills and live in a clean, healthy environment. However, many of our Voices for Power leaders do not have access to clean, affordable energy. Low-income households, renters, people living in strata and people living in social housing, are locked out of opportunities and technologies that would help us lower our bills and live sustainably.

Liuanga is the CALD Mission Officer for the Sydney Presbytery of the Uniting Church in Australia, a support resourcing role for congregations that are culturally and linguistically diverse. Liuanga is a renter in Sydney's Inner West and a member of the Uniting Church, a partner of the Voices for Power campaign.

"As a renter, I am blocked from being able to access solar or energy efficiency - which I know can go a long way to reducing my power bills and not contribute to harming our climate. **My community overwhelmingly are renters. Additionally, our families usually live together, so during the coronavirus pandemic, we are seeing our energy bills rise which puts a lot of stress on us.**"

We call on the signatories of the Charter to work collaboratively across our communities, government and the private sector to create structural change around the rights of renters, low-income households and people living in social housing so that clean, affordable energy is accessible to everyone.

The Voices for Power campaign is involved in the Western Sydney Haystacks Solar Garden pilot program which will open up access to solar power. This is a groundbreaking pilot program that means a lot to Liuanga-

"With a solar garden, we can finally participate in the new clean energy technology. We are finally able, as a community, to make sure we are sourcing our electricity from means that won't destroy our planet. **We want to save our homes in Australia and in the Pacific, the solar garden is a way for our community to be part of the action.**"

We have a vision of a solar garden in every local government area in Sydney. This is a first step to making clean, affordable energy accessible for everyone living in Sydney. We call on the signatories of the Charter to fund and give support to more solar garden pilot programs.

Affordability

At the previous panel discussion of the Charter, it was clear that as we enter a new phase of the coronavirus pandemic, there will be a "tsunami" of debt and power cut offs. Coronavirus is *not* business

as usual. We are seeing everyday people accumulating unmanageable debt and, for some, they may be accessing Centrelink or struggling to pay their energy bill for the first time.

Yoon is a social work student, a small business owner and a renter. She is a member of the Korean community and is a core leader with the Sydney Alliance's work with International Students.

“My family and I are all living and working from home together because we need to stay safe during coronavirus. **We are seeing our bills go up and up but because we rent we can't install energy efficient technologies or install solar panels to mitigate our bills.** We are frustrated because we have no control or choice in the matter.”

We call on the signatories to the Charter to ensure payment support and other forms of assistance *continue to be open* to any customer having trouble paying their bills. We call on the Charter to **extend their best practice in centering customer needs that was born in the early days of coronavirus into 'business as usual'**.

Affordability has always been a priority for Voices for Power and our communities. Yoon says:

“As a small business owner, I understand that companies want to be efficient and deliver a good product to their customers. Clean, affordable energy is what is best for me and my family but it is also the best business choice for energy providers. **Providers should be doing everything they can to lower our bills and make our energy sustainable.**”

We call on the signatories of the Charter to work collaboratively with consumers and governments to help households reduce their bills. We have a vision that everyone has access to technologies and opportunities that will improve their energy efficiency. We have a vision that energy companies lead the way in promoting energy literacy amongst our communities.

Community Engagement

Migrant communities and communities of a non-English speaking background have endured discrimination and exclusion by energy providers. Efforts to engage with these communities and empower them as energy consumers continue to be inadequate. **Without meaningful and strengths-based engagement with our communities, the Charter is in danger of perpetuating myths and stereotypes.**

Asha is the Executive Officer of the Sydney Community Forum which promotes community development and social justice in the Inner West and South Sydney region. Sydney Community Forum has a long history of working with local community groups and ethnic associations, they are a key partner organisation in Voices for Power. She shares the story of how her parents were treated in the energy market:

“My parents spoke with an accent, they didn't have lived experience of English as it's spoken in Australia. They are deeply engaged with their family, community and the world and very aware of climate injustice from first hand experience. When they arrived in Australia they wanted to understand the best energy plan for their new home. But when they started going about this, **people spoke to them like they were idiots.**”

Voices for Power is deeply committed to building the leadership and power of migrants in Sydney. Signatories of the Energy Charter, have committed to, in funding our train-the-trainer program, allowing us to continue this important work. We hope to expand this work with a 'mobile community energy information hub'. The hub will be a bus that travels around Sydney providing culturally tailored information that will empower our communities as leaders and energy consumers.

Our communities are experts in our own identities and experiences. We are resilient, strong and knowledgeable- we are an untapped resource. **Migrant communities should lead the solutions** that will bring to life the aims of the Charter and make clean and affordable energy available for everyone.

“The Charter cannot be another document that sits on the shelf gathering dust- it must be a living and dynamic enabler of our communities founded on a ‘strengths’ model. The success of this Charter isn't about funding as many workshops as possible, it is about creating change for our communities. Success is increasing the amount of people who can access the best deal for themselves, it is decreasing people applying for 'bills relief', it is building meaningful relationships.” Asha

Sustainability- Clean Energy

Our communities are already experiencing the impacts that burning coal has on our environment. Voices for Power as a coalition of migrant communities and allies deeply understands that **clean energy is the only viable energy future**. Clean energy is the only way to speak to our campaign values of accessibility, affordability and community engagement- these cannot be separate conversations.

Tania lives in the B'nai B'rith Retirement Village at Princess Gardens, she is the NSW Administration Coordinator for Creators of Peace and a board member for Newtown Synagogue. For Tania, she needs access to clean energy for herself and her family.

“As seniors, we have a responsibility to the next generations to live sustainably. I want to be a role model and do my part in leaving my grandchildren and future generations a cleaner, safer, more peaceful environment.”

Voices for Power is committed to working with the private sector and government at the local and State level to achieve a future with clean and affordable energy for all. Tania, with other leaders in Voices for Power, has been successful in receiving a grant from Waverley Council's 'Building Futures Program' for an energy audit of the retirement village where she lives.

“It's my dream to live in an affordable retirement community that actualises my Jewish values of taking care of the earth. This energy audit is a first step for my retirement village to be an example to my Jewish community and other aged care organisations.”

We call on the signatories of the Charter to collaborate with local governments to increase the availability of such grant schemes. We call on signatories to work harmoniously with civil society and all levels of government for clean energy futures for our communities. Clean energy must be made affordable for our communities in the short and long term.

“If you want our business, you have to make the entry into clean energy more affordable.” Tania