

The Hon Ken Wyatt AM MP
Minister for Indigenous Australians
Parliament House, Canberra, ACT 2600.

29th March 2020

Dear Minister Wyatt,

Re: Urgent measures to help prevent the catastrophic impact of COVID-19 on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people/communities

We are writing as a group of health professionals to urge you to do whatever is necessary to empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people/communities to take protective actions regarding COVID-19. As in all measures, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community guidance, involvement in design and decision making is essential.

There is an urgent imperative to prevent the spread of COVID-19 into Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, which are particularly vulnerable to its impacts. Given the multiple and significant health issues faced by many in isolated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, and the lack of intensive/accessible health facilities, the death rates of a COVID-19 outbreak would be very high.

Related critical issues include:

- the risk posed by non-essential 'fly in fly out' (FIFO) workforces into remote communities;
- the need for early release of imprisoned Aboriginal people (those serving time for lesser offences), given incarceration massively increases risk of infection and death;
- ensuring the ongoing provision of supplies in a reliable and cost-effective manner;
- access to clear, accurate health information – both in English *and* in local languages; and
- provision for health worker support, testing and isolation/quarantine facilities.

Clearly there are different situations across the country; there is no 'one size fits all' approach.

[After reaching out to a number of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander corporations, individuals and health care workers, we strongly advocate for these recommendations with urgency:](#)

1) Clear protocols must be established to cease non-essential FIFO contact with local workers and community, as well as ensuring adequate hygiene measures are used at every point.

Where the separation of workers is not feasible, we request that either FIFO work should cease, or a local workforce should be given extended paid leave, given the key role this income plays in many communities.

2) The urgent release of many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander minor offenders from custody.

Specifically, this applies to those who are on remand or in custody for minor offences and/or not deemed as a threat to others. This includes women, young people, and those at greatest risk of dying from COVID-19, e.g. the elderly, and people with pre-existing health conditions.

At all costs, we must prevent any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander deaths in custody from COVID-19. These are *preventable* deaths.

3) Provision by government of guaranteed supplies of staples to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

This is increasingly becoming necessary, especially given remote locations can have few alternatives and prohibitive costs. The subsidisation of fresh food, particularly fruit and vegetables, may also improve the nutrition, health and resilience of communities.

Currently, there are reports of essential item shortages similar to those noted in metropolitan areas. As examples, a lack of meat, toilet paper, hand sanitiser and basic food items are now common. . The adequate provision of cleaning supplies is imperative, as many of these communities do not have reliable access to running water in all homes. Ammunition used in hunting is also in short supply in some areas. Various communities are also reporting price gouging, with some locations seeing essentials like milk and toilet paper double their usual cost.

Further, while encouraging isolation from nearby towns would reduce the spread of COVID-19, it is also very difficult to enforce if there is limited access to many essential supplies locally.

4) The provision of clear, accurate and up-to-date information (preferably “in language”) would help to mitigate the worry, confusion and fear that is currently being reported in some communities.

For example, speaking of ‘avoidance’ can mean many different things in cultural contexts. Further, strong cultural traditions might prevent people from readily embracing safer, recommended hygiene practices. For example, some people may be more concerned about not disrespecting Elders, wanting to attend a funeral and observe Sorry Business, and so on. Hence, the government needs to

be very clear in its messaging across media platforms about the *actual* risks involved and the recommended precautions people should take. Culturally appropriate work *with* communities and Elders to find new solutions that also ensure they can continue to practice their Law and culture must be an imperative. Noting, there are many existing language centres that could assist with this messaging (ideally for a reasonable fee in this time of economic uncertainty).

5) Provision for health worker support and training, testing and isolation/quarantine facilities.

Health workers in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities or in remote regions need specialist training in this time to ensure they have access to the latest information, as well as Personal Protective Equipment and testing facilities. Capacity to allow for safe isolation or quarantining is vital in helping control the disease.

We strongly urge the government to work with local community-controlled services to ensure vital services such as dialysis services, mental health services, telehealth services and supplies lines of medication are not reduced during this time.

As healthcare workers, our concern is for all people facing this global pandemic. But our First Nations people are particularly at risk here in Australia.

There are significant urgent actions that need to be taken NOW, to prevent unnecessary deaths.

We are sure you share this concern and we look forward to hearing what you can do in this rapidly deteriorating and highly threatening situation.

Yours sincerely

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cc

The Hon Greg Hunt MP, Minister for Health

The Hon Chris Bowen MP, Shadow Health Minister

The Hon Richard DiNatale MP Health Spokesperson Australian Greens

Chief Ministers ACT and NT, State Premiers WA, SA, Vic, Tas, NSW, Qld