

## **MEDIA RELEASE**

THURSDAY 9 SEPTEMBER 2021

### **Aboriginal health peak body calls for a 90-95% Aboriginal vaccination rate threshold before opening Territory borders**

The Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance NT (AMSANT) today called on the NT Government to adopt a 90-95% Aboriginal vaccination rate threshold before opening the NT borders.

The call was made by AMSANT's Board and endorsed by the AMSANT membership, who are currently meeting in Darwin.

"A target of a 90-95% vaccination rate for all Aboriginal Territorians 12 years and older is required if we are to prevent or minimise the deadly toll of COVID in our communities," AMSANT CEO, John Paterson said.

"The national target of 80% vaccinations of eligible adults 16 years and older would be a disaster in our communities, which have a much younger age profile and would equate to only about 55% of the total Aboriginal population vaccinated. At that level the virus would rip through our community like wildfire. With one of the world's highest rates of chronic disease and very overcrowded housing, we cannot risk the devastation this would cause.

"We only have to look at western NSW where our countrymen are suffering. Our hearts go out to them.

"There is, for example, a single Aboriginal family in western NSW that has infected 40 family members.

"With uncontrolled infections in other states we are in an emergency situation with a small window of opportunity before the virus enters our borders, to accelerate our vaccination program and ensure our communities are prepared when the virus comes.

"Vaccination is the highest priority.

"In order to achieve a 90-95% target in our communities we need five crucial conditions in place," Mr Paterson said.

"We need physical access to vaccines when and where they are needed in order to capitalise on every opportunity to get jabs in arms. Access has been a problem but is getting much better.

"We need a workforce above normal levels so that it is able to prioritise and carry out planned vaccination strategies and outreach tailored to regional and local community situations. Right now, nearly all of our clinics are short staffed – they need more hands on deck to make this work.

"We also need adopt outreach engagement that gets to where people are and that includes education to each family, supported by strong Aboriginal leadership, to overcome hesitancy.

"We need incentives, both financial and non-financial, to encourage people to step forward.

"Lastly, we need a stronger focus on promotion in language and in all forms of media – we need to get the word out in a way that is accessible to and understandable by our communities.

“Our health leaders are already rolling up their sleeves and leading the way in their communities, getting the message out. But they need support, and they need their health services to be resourced to do the job we know we can do.

“We welcome that the Chief Minister has foreshadowed a possible higher vaccination rate threshold based on the NT’s different circumstances, including younger age profile and higher Indigenous population.

“We urge the Chief Minister to stand firm on his government’s commitment to protect our communities by adopting a minimum target of 90-95% for the NT’s Aboriginal population,” Mr Paterson concluded.

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