



The Hon Scott Morrison MP  
Prime Minister  
Parliament House  
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Prime Minister,

Australia has now experienced two waves of COVID-19 and, with the notable exception of Victoria, has successfully managed to keep community transmission relatively low. The last month or so in Victoria, and sporadic outbreaks in other areas, shows that COVID-19 is here to stay for the foreseeable future and that Governments and aged care providers must work together to build and strengthen the protections and mitigations required in aged care.

Catholic Health Australia welcomes National Cabinet's commitment to a range of further initiatives to protect older Australians. These include plans for face to face infection control training with aged care homes; compulsory use of masks; workforce controls; use of private hospital resources where there are active cases of COVID-19; and planning for the establishment of Coordination Centres similar to the Victorian Aged Care Response Centre (VARC) in each state and territory.

There is the opportunity however, to ensure that the development of these measures builds on and learns from the considerable experience of the aged care sector.

In addition, while many of the measures introduced to date have been helpful, implementation would have been improved by involving aged care expertise and on-the-ground knowledge in their design.

Below are suggestions to further enhance the protections for our older Australians.

### **Command and Control**

The commitment by National Cabinet to prepare for the establishment of Coordination Centres will build good operational capacity at state and territory levels.

It is essential that personnel and consultation mechanisms in these centres blend both health and aged care together. This has happened to some extent in the VARC, but the connections with the broader sector remain weak, leading to confusion and disconnection. This is understandable given the set up speed and scale of issues being dealt with, but must be built into the foundation of the centres in other states and territories.

Given that state and federal health interface issues are magnified during a pandemic, there should also be a national coordination point – this may be through enhancing the scope of the expertise of the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC) or establishing an aged care-specific group with direct aged care experience and knowledge of aged care service delivery to advise AHPPC.

Because this would bring together high level expertise and operational know how, it would be the ideal group to develop more practical guidelines to highlight what and when actions need to occur, as well as clarifying the overall chain of command. This would also deal with the perceived coordination issues highlighted by the Royal Commission and help to restore public confidence in the COVID-19 aged care response.

### **More Staff to Support Aged Care Residents**

While we knew from the beginning that workforce would be a key challenge, the scale of community transmission in Victoria has demonstrated just how exposed aged care is.

The issue that needs to be addressed now is workforce availability. We need to ensure that providers have enough staff to keep COVID-19 out as much as possible. Where this has not been possible, we need enough staff to ensure that small scale infections do not escalate into full-blown outbreaks. Staffing that makes sure that families and loved ones can visit and remain connected, that infection control and Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) usage can be monitored, and that quality communication is occurring – in short ensuring that residents are getting the care we all expect and strive for on a daily basis.

This has perhaps been the biggest collective failure in Victoria, with the system stretched beyond its capacity – even including the surge workforce and state health personnel brought in for support. The National Aged Care Emergency Response (NACER) initiative to be announced shortly will add another string to the bow, but there are some other initiatives to be continued or enhanced and resourced that will give the best possible chance of having enough workforce Australia-wide:

- Adoption of the one worker/one site principles nationally. This will simultaneously assist to prevent the spread between aged care homes and also help to keep staff well. As the Commonwealth has recognised in Victoria, these principles will only work if there is no financial disadvantage for an individual worker.
- Introduction of paid pandemic leave across the country rather than in hotspots only. This becomes a preventative measure that helps to stop the spread and entry of the virus into aged care homes.
- A stepped-up, proactive and ongoing testing regime for aged care staff to ensure infection is picked up rapidly, especially where asymptomatic workers may not realise the threat they pose by attending work.
- Ensuring the timely availability of PPE, noting especially the intention regarding compulsory use of masks.
- Concierge staffing support to ensure visiting is conducted in accordance with the Visitor Access Code. This role can also become a key communication point with families.
- Generally, aged care needs more staff and, noting the level of unemployment in the community, aged care can make a positive contribution to Australia's economic recovery by creating additional job opportunities. Experience from Dorothy Henderson Lodge provides a model for retraining people from other sectors, particularly those who may have previously worked in aged care.

### **Better Health Outcomes for Residents**

The Commonwealth/State interface on health is critical to achieving containment in residential care during a pandemic. We welcome the National Cabinet commitment to develop joint Commonwealth/State plans that include a range of additional emergency response capabilities, and recommend that the following is considered:

- Placing an infection control specialist on site when there is an outbreak to oversee PPE usage and all other control measures. While training videos are useful, aged care staff such as personal care workers, who make up the majority of the workforce, have lower level clinical skills and experience than their health counterparts. Hospitals, with highly trained clinical expertise, run daily training and oversight of use of PPE to ensure infection control is tight and well executed.
- Transfer of index/first positive COVID cases to hospital to assist the individual, give an opportunity to try and stop the spread, and allow time for hospital-in-the-home to be properly and fully established where appropriate. The current process in Victoria is exposing more residents and staff to the virus, often resulting in higher numbers of people needing to be transferred to hospital or acute settings overall. The management of the Dorothy Henderson outbreak, which largely followed this process, is the current best practice model. It resulted in fewer deaths and a subsequent capacity to successfully support people (residents and staff) in the aged care home.

### **Continuation of Government initiatives.**

The Commonwealth Government has already instituted many useful measures which have been appreciated by all working in residential and home-based aged care. Many of these were originally flagged with a six month time frame. Now that it is clear that COVID-19 will be with us for the foreseeable future, and ongoing vigilance is needed, we consider that these measures should be extended, along with a review of the amounts and best payment mechanisms to have in place.

Catholic Health Australia members are committed to ensuring that older Australians remain as safe and well as possible through the pandemic. Accordingly, we welcome your and National Cabinet's consideration of the issues we have raised above.

Yours sincerely



Pat Garcia  
Chief Executive Officer  
Catholic Health Australia

16 August 2020



Cc:

The Hon. Greg Hunt MP  
Senator the Hon Richard Colbeck  
Dr Brendan Murphy  
The Hon. Daniel Andrews MP  
The Hon. Gladys Berejiklian MP  
The Hon. Anastacia Palaszcuk MP  
The Hon. Steven Marshall MP  
The Hon. Mark McGowan MLA  
The Hon. Michael Gunner MLA  
The Hon. Peter Gutwein MP  
The Hon. Andrew Barr MLA