

13 January 2022

The Hon Dominic Perrottet MP
Premier
GPO Box 5341
SYDNEY NSW 2001

CC: The Hon. Natasha Maclaren-Jones MLC, Minister for
Families and Communities and Minister for Disability
Services

The Hon. Brad Hazzard MP, Minister for Health
The Hon. Natalie Ward MLC, Minister for Women's Safety
and the Prevention of Domestic and Sexual Violence
Catherine D'Elia, Acting Secretary, Department of
Communities and Justice

Via email:

Dear Premier

RE: Continued support for the social services sector and the communities they serve during the pandemic

We write to thank the NSW Government for its work in securing the first batch of Rapid Antigen Tests (RATs) for essential public workers and vulnerable communities. As per our correspondence last week, this is urgently needed throughout NSW.

While the steps taken by the NSW Government are extremely welcome, there are additional measures we urge the Government to adopt to ensure that all frontline NGOs and the communities they serve are safely supported.

Prioritising RATs for other frontline services

The announcement on 9 January prioritising vulnerable population groups in the rollout of RATs, commencing with deliveries to Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services and NGOs supporting rough sleepers and refugees, is a positive step. This has been followed by a departmental communique today regarding the distribution of RATs to providers of 24/7 residential services, including residential homelessness and out of home care services, youth justice residential rehabilitation centres and Intensive Therapeutic Care providers. Organisations identified as priorities very much look forward to the imminent delivery of RAT supplies so that these essential services can continue to operate safely through the current outbreak.

This decision recognises the diversity of the social services system beyond disability and aged care, and its critical role at the frontline supporting the most vulnerable in our communities, which is even more vital during crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic.

In this regard, we also urge the Government to prioritise RATs for non-24/7 organisations providing essential services and support in the community, including family home visits, psychosocial support and practical assistance for vulnerable groups. Increasingly, with pandemic fatigue, clients are

seeking face to face support and the opportunity to connect in person. Ready, free access to RATs will allow services to provide this support and connection, and return service delivery to typical operating capacity. It will also help reduce pressure on 24/7 services, Triple Zero, emergency departments and other acute settings.

These organisations include: neighbourhood centres, family support services, women's and domestic violence organisations, multicultural services, Aboriginal controlled community organisations, and child and youth services.

Supporting essential services meet the challenges of Omicron and keep staff and vulnerable communities safe

Frontline services are facing increased demand, staff shortages and additional costs because of current Covid-19 conditions.

While some public services stopped providing services over the Christmas and New Year period, these NGOs have continued to provide vital support under the most trying of circumstances, including to people directly impacted by Covid-19. Once again, we have seen workers in local community organisations stepping forward when needed to keep vulnerable households safe.

The additional funds provided through various, one-off Covid-19 grant programs and the flexible way in which they have been able to be used has been greatly appreciated by services, giving them the confidence and capacity to respond quickly to vulnerable people impacted by the pandemic. However, some services have now fully expended their grants or are nearing expenditure deadlines as demand due to Omicron continues or grows. Other services may not have accessed these grants, particularly in areas less impacted by the Delta outbreak.

In this context, we urge the Government to resource these programs beyond original timeframes and ensure that all funded providers have access to additional resourcing to support communities responding to the Omicron wave.

Further, organisations are facing a new set of challenges due to the increased transmissibility and prevalence of the virus as well as a different public health and policy context. To support safe and continued service delivery, organisations now require resourcing to enable them to access:

- higher grade PPE including N95 masks and eye protection, and
- isolation or sick leave pay for workers without access to such entitlements, so they are not incentivised to work when infectious.

Up-to-date advice for frontline services

Finally, our members would benefit from clear and consistent advice from NSW Health, the Department of Communities and Justice and relevant regulatory bodies to manage what can be competing requirements arising from client need, changing public health orders, contractual obligations, and work health and safety considerations. Sector peaks are keen to work collaboratively to find practical solutions to the evolving situation and problems arising from the intersection of different perspectives, approaches and advice across various state government agencies.

We therefore propose that the Government convenes a committee to be co-chaired by senior executives from the Ministry of Health and the Department of Communities and Justice, with membership including iCare, SafeWork NSW, and selected sector peak bodies such as NCOSS, ACWA, Fams, Homelessness NSW, AbSec, along with the Australian Services Union and the NGO Co-Chair of the Health NGOs Community of Practice.

We propose this group be convened immediately and meet weekly through the Omicron wave to ensure consistency and clarity of advice regarding what is required of frontline organisations and to identify and communicate best practice and appropriate management of risk in various settings, in a fast-changing, uncertain environment.

We would be more than happy to discuss these matters further with you or relevant staff. Once again, we thank you for your hard work and look forward to progressing these matters as urgently as possible.

Yours sincerely



Joanna Quilty
Chief Executive Officer
NSW Council of Social Services



Katherine McKernan
Chief Executive Officer
Homelessness NSW



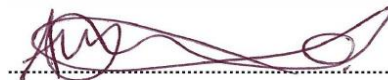
Delia Donovan
Chief Executive Officer
DV NSW



Steve Kinmond
Chief Executive Officer
Association of Children's
Welfare Organisations



John Leha
Chief Executive Officer
Absec



Angus McFarland
Assistant Secretary
Australian Services Union
NSW & ACT (Services) Branch



Julie Hourigan Ruse
Chief Executive Officer
Fams



Can Yasmut
Chief Executive Officer
Local and Community Services Association

