



Australian Government

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Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Group on COVID-19

Communique Update: 14 December 2020

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Group on COVID-19 (the Taskforce) convened in March 2020 to develop and deliver a National Management Plan to protect communities. The Taskforce also advises on health issues related to COVID-19 and is co-chaired by the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO), and the Australian Government Department of Health. This communique provides an update on their work and current key focus areas.

Current status of coronavirus

As of 13 December 2020, a total of 28,031 cases of COVID-19 have been reported in Australia. This includes 25,473 recovered cases and unfortunately 908 deaths. Since 16 September 2020, active case numbers nationally continue to decline. For further details please refer to the COVID-19 [fortnightly national epidemiological report](#) or the [COVID-19 current situation](#) which is updated daily.

As at 13 December 2020 there have been 147 cases reported in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Approximately 80% of cases were reported as locally acquired. Of those, more than 75% were reported in major cities. Approximately 20% were reported in inner or outer regional Australia and 4% were reported as interstate travel. Approximately 20% of all cases are reported as being acquired overseas with approximately half of these associated with cruise ships.

While still distressing, the strength of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander response by communities, Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Sector, health services, and everyone involved shows in these numbers. The **number of cases among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is six times lower** than they would be if the population was affected at the same rate as the rest of Australia. Efforts to date to protect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are working. However, it is important to ensure that messaging continues to reach communities to promote the need to maintain public health measures especially leading in to the holiday period with border restrictions relaxing and the anticipated cross border travel.

Developing guidance for urban and regional communities

In recognition of the large urban and regional population of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and the likelihood that hotspots will occur in regional or urban areas due to the proximity of international ports, the [National Guidance for Urban and Regional Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities for COVID-19 \(Urban and Regional Guidance\)](#) was developed to complement the CDNA *National Guidance for remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities for COVID-19*.

The Urban and Regional Guidance outlines considerations for preparing for and responding to COVID-19 cases, clusters and outbreaks within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in urban and regional settings.

The Urban and Regional Guidance aims to provide a principles-based approach to guide health services and local public health authorities in developing and implementing plans at the operational level.

The experience of urban outbreaks in Tasmania, Queensland, Victoria and South Australia have directly informed this Guidance. The Taskforce appreciates the contribution of ACCHS, sector support organisations and government representatives in preparing this important document.

COVID-19 Vaccine Strategy Taskforce overview

The established Australian Government cross-departmental Vaccine Taskforce provided an update to the Taskforce on 18 November 2020 as part of their ongoing engagement to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander perspectives are included in all stages of vaccine planning. As part of their update the Vaccine Taskforce advised that the Prime Minister has released the [Australian COVID-19 Vaccination Policy](#) which outlines the approach to providing COVID-19 vaccines in Australia. A [vaccine hub](#) has also been created, with information for Australians about the development, approval process and plans for COVID-19 vaccines.

COVID-19 response updates

General Practice-led Respiratory Clinics (GPRCs)

All 23 Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Service-GPRCs are now operational, although some have exercised the option to pause testing while case numbers are low, people are still able to access COVID testing at relevant primary health care clinics. Sites remain able to re-activate quickly should the need arise. The additional funding announced by the Prime Minister on 18 September 2020 and formalised in the Budget provides all GPRCs with the option of remaining open until 31 March 2021. All ACCHS GPRCs have taken that option.

This brings the cumulative total of GPRCs that opened across the country to 150.

Point of Care Testing (PoCT) Program

The Australian Government has provided support to establish a rapid COVID-19 PCR PoCT Program for remote and rural Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. As at 13 December all 86 sites have completed training and 8,970 tests have been performed. A total of 86 health services are participating in the program; 32 in the Northern Territory, nine in South Australia, two in Victoria, five in New South Wales, 18 in Queensland and 20 in Western Australia. A further 67 services are acting as spoke sites, increasing the reach of the program to over 150 remote communities.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people make up 57% of the tests, showing that the sites have been well-placed. Additional funding announced on 18 September will continue the PoCT program until 31 March 2021.

The PoCT sites are:

Northern Territory	Western Australia	South Australia	New South Wales	Victoria	Queensland
Ali Curung Alpurrurulam Alyangula Ampilatawatja Borrooloola Bulman Alice Springs – (Congress) Daly River Galiwin'ku Gunbalanya Julanimawu Kalkarindji Kintore Laynhapuy Maningrida Milingimbi Minyerri Ngukurr Numbulwar Papunya Ramingining Tennant Creek Timber Creek Wadeye Wugularr Yarralin Yuendumu Yulara	Balgo Beagle Bay Bidyadanga Billiluna Blackstone Carnarvon Derby Fitzroy Crossing Halls Creek Jigalong Kalgoorlie Kalumburu Kiwirrkurra Kununurra Laverton Meekatharra Mount Magnet Tjuntjuntjara Warakurna Warburton Wiluna	Amata Ceduna Coober Pedy Ernabella Indulkana Oak Valley Port Augusta Pipalyatjara Yalata	Broken Hill Coomealla Moree Narooma Walgett	Mildura Mooroopna	Aurukun Badu Boigu Cooktown Lockhart River Pormpuraaw Saibai Weipa Wuchopperen

Aged Care

The Department of Health's National COVID Aged Care policy branch provided an update of their work which included:

- Key role is to assist and support States and Territories to be as prepared as possible for an outbreak of COVID in aged care facilities.
- Supports the Aged care advisory group, which reports to AHPPC and currently meets twice a week.
- Updated the National Aged Care COVID plan, to reflect recommendations of the Aged Care Royal commission special report on COVID-19; on lessons learnt thus far; and including cross linkages to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Management Plan and Guidance documents. It will be shared to the Advisory Group in due course.

The Taskforce will continue to receive updates on related elements of the aged care response.

National Surveillance Plan

The Taskforce endorsed the Surveillance Plan Working Group's recommendations for more detailed and targeted considerations for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the *Australian National Disease Surveillance Plan for COVID-19*. These considerations will provide a better understanding of the impact of COVID-19 in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and further support tailoring of public health measures for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. The considerations are currently being considered by CDNA.

Other related news

One of the key strengths of the Taskforce has been raising new and emerging issues and sharing current response strategies. Representatives from the State and Territory ACCHS, sector support organisations and governments regularly provide updates about the local situation. The Taskforce receives updates from jurisdictions experiencing an increase in COVID-19 cases or any relevant issues. In particular through the recent outbreaks in Victoria and South Australia this regular, local information about the evolving situation, including successes and challenges has helped all jurisdictions to review and prepare their own plans.

In 2021 The Department of Health will continue to provide regular electronic newsletter updates about the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander response to COVID-19. [Subscribe](#) to directly receive these updates.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Group on COVID-19 wished everyone a happy and COVIDsafe holiday period.