Rachel Stephen-Smith MLA

Minister for Health

Minister for Disability

Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs

ACT Legislative Assembly

cc. Renee Heaton  
Chair of the ACT Disability Reference Group

Dear Minister,

We are writing to you regarding the current COVID-19 situation in the ACT. It is our view that swiftly deteriorating circumstances now require ACT Health to urgently adjust community settings and responses to align with the shift in Canberra Health Services alert level to ensure that people with disabilities are safe and have the resources to attempt to minimise health risks.

The increase in acute respiratory infections, including COVID-19, influenza, and respiratory syncytial virus (RSV), create a disproportionate and heightened risk for vulnerable people with disability in the community and within health and accommodation settings. We ask that specific preventative measures are put in place and/or reinstated to ensure the protection of vulnerable Canberrans.

Reported COVID cases tripled in the ACT from April to May. In the last week of May, four people lost their lives to COVID. Three more people lost their lives to COVID in the past week. The true nature and extent of the current wave is unknown given the lack of (free) testing and reporting requirements. This remains highly troubling four years into this pandemic.

COVID has become a leading cause of death in Australia and continues to cause significant adverse health impacts. The evidence surrounding long COVID, immune system dysregulation, and increased risk of cardiovascular disease is irrefutable. Despite declining media coverage and a general lack of political interest, this pandemic is not over. COVID continues to spread in the community and within service settings. Each new variant further avoids immunity, continuing to place vulnerable people at risk.

We urge ACT Health to act quickly. We have seen already in South Australia the pressures facing public health systems and the failure to adequately prepare for and mitigate airborne respiratory infections.

In terms of testing, we urge ACT Health to reverse the decision to end free Rapid Antigen Tests (RATs), and to facilitate their priority distribution to people in disability settings and to people who receive NDIS packages with in-home workers. We also call for free supply and encouragement of use of high quality (N95 or P2) face masks in disability settings.

In terms of vaccination AFI urge ACT Health to increase access to vaccinations in settings including routine in ward vaccinations being offered, where it is clinically appropriate, to all long stay patients in The University of Canberra Rehabilitation Hospital.

Finally, we urge ACT Health to issue a renewed disability specific advisory which includes clear and concise information about these measures as well as information on how to receive free booster vaccinations.

Unlike in 2020, we know what works in terms of transmission reduction. To ensure the continued prioritisation of safety in all health settings, including primary care, we bring attention once again to the clean air recommendations embedded in our [Shared Statement on COVID-19,](https://www.advocacyforinclusion.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Shared-statement-and-report-AFI-COVID-as-at-29-Sept-1.pdf) AFI’s [White Paper on COVID-19](https://www.advocacyforinclusion.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/White-Paper-COVID-19.pdf), as well as the [evidence-based advice](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/656d053d3b66b13402b7fe50/t/6620c4348b95c33addead9fe/1713423436328/9789240090576-eng-2.pdf) from OzSage.

Now that the ACT Government has decided to treat COVID-19 as an endemic condition we are keen to understand how the Government, Canberra Health Services and ACT Health intends to support the survival, wellbeing and connection of people with disability at risk of severe illness as well as provide treatment, rehabilitation and support to people with Long COVID.

It has been some time since the COVID-19 disability advisory committee was disbanded so we suggest a check in meeting might be useful. I understand from discussions that there would also be interest from ACTCOSS, Carers ACT, HCCA as well as DPO’s and DRO’s in such a meeting.

Thanks for your attention to this matter and I would be happy to discuss it with you.

Regards,

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**Craig Wallace**   
Head of Policy

Advocacy for Inclusion

20 June 2024