

Statement from the Dharriwaa Elders Group 22 October 2021

During the COVID emergency the Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations of Walgett have acted quickly to protect our most vulnerable community members. People have been doing all they can to stop the transmission of COVID here, staying home and looking out for others.

The Walgett Aboriginal Medical Service led by Katrina Ward has coordinated incredible local efforts around testing and vaccinating, her staff often working into the night to process test results in-house and managing severe staff shortages when people needed to isolate after being identified as close contacts.

The local NSW Health Western Local Health District team led by Suzanne Mahoney have adapted their work practices in order to provide popup vaccination and testing, and support families in COVID isolation on top of their usual hospital duties.

The head of the Walgett Local Emergency Management Committee, Inspector Trent Swinton, has worked hard to keep us up to date with the latest information he receives, and help us communicate the urgent needs in our community to government.

The local businesses, especially Walgett IGA and Walgett Pharmacy, have introduced systems to keep our community safe and keep their vital supplies available, despite staff shortages due to staff needing to isolate. Walgett IGA has introduced a click and collect scheme and a home delivery service. We have been assured by the Local Emergency Operations Controller that food supplies can be aided by police and other emergency agencies if needed.

We have also seen concern and generosity from individuals and organisations across the country for our community. Dharriwaa Elders Group is deeply grateful to all those who have sent donations of PPE and funds to help us in our COVID relief, prevention and safety efforts. We have continued to advocate for community needs that we identify through our networks and official emergency mechanisms.

However, despite all this effort locally, **today Dharriwaa Elders Group continues to be extremely worried and angry about the government response to COVID in Aboriginal communities**, both here in Walgett and nearby where every day we are continuing to see new cases.

Walgett postcode today has 28 active COVID cases and at least 70% of these are children - some we believe (but have not been told) were infected while attending school, or infected by siblings during isolation who were infected at school. All three schools had many teachers and students who were required to isolate after being identified as Close Contacts after returning to school in early October. Privacy prevents DEG and the community being provided with the complete picture. While we are assured that those who are sick are residing within 12 households and have been isolating for some time, this is still a high percentage of our population. And while it has been encouraging to hear that school staff are rapidly achieving full vaccination, we have not seen up to date data regarding vaccination rates of Aboriginal people living in the Walgett town and nearby villages. We remain very concerned about the potential for further COVID cases amongst children in Walgett and in turn, amongst their family members.

Today we report the concerns of Walgett parents that schools are not COVID safe.

Some families are telling us that they are deciding to keep their children from returning to school because they fear another COVID outbreak like the one that spread in Walgett schools when they returned, too early in our opinion, in early October. Vaccinations are not yet available to children under 12 anywhere in NSW and vaccination clinics have not yet been set up in Walgett schools for children over 12, despite community requests. We cannot find out how many children in Walgett between 12 and 16 years have already been vaccinated, and suspect that much effort is still needed to ensure safe levels of vaccination. We understand that the Walgett Aboriginal Medical Service has not yet been provided with supplies of the

Moderna vaccine, which is urgently needed to ensure as many young people are vaccinated as possible. Walgett's chemist does not have the capacity to vaccinate. Yet we are hearing that students in Walgett are being marked "absent" when their families are keeping them home where they believe they are safer. We feel strongly that this is not fair as it will further affect our children who already face significant educational disadvantage, and impact their families who rely on Abstudy income which is taken away when students are absent for significant periods of time.

The Catholic Schools Office in our region has allowed Walgett's St Joseph's School to continue to teach remotely to children, and we believe this option should also be available for public school students. **We call on NSW Education to enable the continuation of remote learning for students from home where satisfactory ventilation solutions are not yet available for their schools, in communities like Walgett that have at-risk populations and high percentages of active COVID.**

It is already too hot in Walgett for children to be learning in the outdoors or with open windows, and we urgently need appropriate ventilation solutions in our schools. We join the calls of people across NSW for COVID safety measures in schools including ventilation and air filtration similar to [those introduced in Victoria](#).

Dharriwaa Elders Group urgently calls for:

- Ventilation solutions for Walgett public schools
- Delivery of remote learning for students while they don't feel safe returning to school, and a commitment that students will not be marked absent in these circumstances.
- Timely information flows from NSW Health to schools regarding COVID cases in Walgett that may affect school attendance
- Vaccinations offered at Walgett high school
- Regular updates on local COVID cases and vaccination rates broken down by Aboriginality and age

Questions for Education Minister: What is the NSW Department of Education's COVID safe plan for Walgett? How can families be reassured that their children will be safe at school in Walgett given the recent cases of transmission? Can the Department ensure that schools are not required to mark children absent until COVID levels reduce in our community and families feel it is safe for their children to return?

Questions for Health Minister: Can the Walgett Aboriginal Medical Service be urgently provided with supplies of the Moderna vaccine? When will vaccinations and rapid COVID testing solutions be offered to Walgett school staff and students?

We are doing all we can to protect our communities and we need governments to step up and do everything they can too.

Please know that contacting us for media statements or other requests takes us away from our frontline work supporting Elders and other vulnerable people in our community at this time. If you wish to contribute, look for fundraising efforts by Aboriginal community controlled organisations on the ground.