

## **Statement from the Dharriwaa Elders Group on Minister Hazzard's visit to Walgett, 8 September 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 has coordinated incredible local efforts around testing and vaccinating as many people as possible.

The head of the Walgett Local Emergency Management Committee, Inspector Trent Swinton, has worked hard to keep us informed of the latest information he receives from his regional and NSW command structure, and help us communicate the urgent needs in our community to government.

We have also seen incredible 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 frontline work.

**However 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 seeing new cases.

**It didn't have to come to this. We would not be in this situation if governments had listened to Walgett's Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations and prepared appropriately for this emergency**, in the decades we have been calling for more infrastructure and resources for community-controlled services and in the 18 months since this pandemic began.

Today Minister Brad Hazzard has flown into Walgett to meet with representatives of our organisation and other first responders.

**We do not wish this to be just a photo opportunity. We ask Minister Hazzard to commit to boosting government investment in the regional capabilities of the NSW Health system and our Aboriginal Medical Services to ensure we are never again in the position we find our community in today.**

**In addition, we raise these concerns:**

- 1. Staff shortages:** We fear shortages of staff in the hospital, NSW public health system, Walgett Aboriginal Medical Service and our own service will lead to preventable deaths in Walgett. When Dharriwaa Elders Group staff retreat from their work because it is no longer safe, we won't be able to put other community members in their place. What will happen to our clients who are the most vulnerable in Walgett, then? We need to see evidence of emergency staffing plans, and proactive recruitment and training efforts. We need to be able to continue to pay the wages of our staff when they are forced to retreat from their work in the community. DEG needs to know what emergency agency staff can take over the tasks required by our Walgett clients.
- 2. Information and accountability around vaccination rates for Aboriginal people:** Just as we need transparent data about transmission and testing, we need data about vaccination rates. It's not enough for governments to keep telling Aboriginal people to just get vaccinated, we have to make sure that vaccines are available and accessible to everyone and we need clear up to date information every day on where, when and how people can get vaccinated across NSW, their Aboriginality and age range by postcode. We also need clear coordination and documentation of vaccination between agencies.
- 3. Timely information about places of concern:** The community, including our frontline workers need to know when to isolate and when to get tested as soon as possible. This information is arriving too slowly to Walgett. Dharriwaa Elders Group will shortly be retracting its frontline workforce if we can't guarantee their safety when they are checking on clients' wellbeing and supporting them to access essential services. We need to see faster advice regarding Walgett places of concern.

4. **People in and leaving custody:** We fear for community members in prison and returning from custody, and their families. Clear information is urgently needed about COVID testing and protocols for people leaving custody, and resourcing for post-release accommodation is critical to ensure people returning from custody and their families can all be kept safe. We also need to stop the flow of people on remand or short sentences going into custody where COVID is spreading.
5. **Clear information about public health orders:** Community members fear leaving their houses in case they are fined by police, yet many are suffering lockdown with large families in small houses. Police and NSW Health need to clearly communicate with the community and young people in particular how they can safely and lawfully be outside for exercise and recreation.
6. **Fines for vulnerable community members:** Public health is not served by police issuing fines to people who are homeless or who have mental health issues or cognitive disability in our community. As a community we need to look out for and support those who are struggling at this time, including those who do not have a home to isolate in.
7. **Investment in housing:** We know of at least 21 individuals who are currently homeless in our community. Hundreds of people (at least 32 Walgett households) live in large multigenerational households because there has not been sufficient investment in housing in Walgett. This need has been documented over many years and all governments are aware of it. The pandemic has made more obvious the risk to public health of homelessness and overcrowding. Short term accommodation options may assist those with COVID to isolate in the short term, however it does not stop transmission.

**Dharriwaa Elders Group urgently calls for:**

- Immediate expansion of staff capability for Walgett and other hospitals in the Western Local Health District so that COVID patients can be treated On Country wherever possible and staff can be kept safe and rotated through isolation.
- Emergency staffing for Dharriwaa Elders Group's service.
- More trained nurses able to give vaccines to support the ongoing vaccination work of Aboriginal Medical Services in Walgett and other western NSW communities.
- Support for mobile testing and vaccination options led by Aboriginal Medical Services that can visit people in their homes where needed.
- Public health orders to be used to keep our community safe and cared for rather than leading to unpayable fines for vulnerable people.
- No-one on remand or short sentences to be going in to custody given the significant risk of contracting and bringing back COVID to our community.
- Clear public health protocols and communication for the release and transportation of people leaving custody to enable them and their families to remain safe.
- Immediate provision of emergency housing for people who are homeless, returning from custody or who need to isolate to protect further transmission of COVID in our community.
- Greater investment in long-term, energy efficient and climate appropriate housing in Walgett and other western NSW communities.

**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.