

Senate Select Committee on COVID-19: 29 September 2020 Public Hearing

Opening statement by Ms Janet Anderson PSM

Good afternoon and thank you for the opportunity to appear before the Committee today.

Since I last appeared before the Committee in early August 2020, the significant community outbreak of COVID-19 in Victoria has gradually been brought under control, and this has thankfully reduced the risk and rate of new cases in residents and staff in aged care homes in that state.

Of the 766 residential aged care services in Victoria, 60 homes (or 7.8%) have experienced an outbreak that has resulted in loss of life. I offer my sincere condolences to every family who has been affected by this tragedy, and also acknowledge the terrible impact of this experience on the aged care staff who cared for, and cared about, those residents who have passed away.

Many of the aged care services that have had an outbreak are now in the recovery phase, welcoming back staff who have been cleared of the virus after a period of self-isolation. Also returning to these services are residents who were transferred to hospital either for treatment for the virus or to separate them from COVID-19 positive residents.

As we are all regularly reminded, the pandemic is not over. The ongoing risks to frail, vulnerable Australians receiving aged care are keeping the entire aged care sector, including the Commission, on high alert.

As discussed at previous appearances at this Committee, the Commission modified its regulatory program in March 2020 to minimise infection risks and focus additional effort where it was needed most to ensure that providers were – and are - doing everything possible to keep aged care consumers safe.

Our COVID-19 regulatory program has included standing up a range of targeted activities including assisting providers with resources and information, requiring them to assess and report on their own preparedness to prevent and respond to an outbreak, and monitoring their readiness through assessment contacts and visits.

Throughout the pandemic, the Commission has continued to closely monitor complaints and other intelligence about aged care services and conduct site visits to monitor and assess the safety and quality of care at aged care services where there has been elevated risk. Introducing a short notice period before each visit was a temporary measure aimed at managing and minimising infection risks to residents, staff and our own employees. We have also taken compliance action, including where there was an immediate and severe risk to residents.

Following the National Cabinet's endorsement in August of the *Plan to Boost Aged Care Preparedness for a Rapid Emergency Response to COVID-19*, the Commission has worked alongside the Commonwealth Department of Health in engaging directly with each state and territory health authority to agree on how we

will co-ordinate our efforts to support residential aged care services in each jurisdiction, and ensure that these services are well-prepared to prevent and respond to a COVID-19 outbreak.

As part of this joint work, the Commission is providing to every state and territory Chief Health Officer (as protected information) selected data we compile about residential aged care services in their jurisdiction, including a risk assessment which we update weekly.

Findings and any actions arising from our infection control monitoring spot checks are also being shared, as the number of residential services visited under this program grows daily in all jurisdictions. These spot checks are helping us to understand risk and inform further regulatory actions where concerns are identified.

The latest data on our regulatory activities during the pandemic is included below for noting by the Committee.

Between 1 March and 25 September 2020, the Commission has:

- Conducted 739 infection control monitoring spot checks on site in residential aged care services;
- Undertaken a total of 1,356 site visits across the country (comprising 982 unannounced and 374 short-notice or announced visits);
- Undertaken 12,050 assessment contacts including telephone and survey contacts with aged care service across Australia and home care consumers;
- Responded to 3,985 requests for assistance from members of the public in relation to COVID-19 and managed 2,053 COVID-19 related complaints about aged care services (in addition to over 3,670 other complaints);
- Undertaken compliance action in relation to services experiencing an outbreak including issuing 3 Non-Compliance Notices and 22 Notices of Requirement to Agree to Certain Matters.

Thank you, Chair.