

Opening Statement to the Senate Inquiry into Australian Government Response to the Covid-19 Pandemic

Thank you to the Committee for the opportunity to represent the views of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with disability at today's hearing. My name is Damian Griffis, I am the CEO of the First Peoples Disability Network. The First Peoples Disability Network is a national organisation representing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with disabilities and their families. We can trace our origins to a gathering of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with disabilities that was held in Alice Springs in 1999. The First Peoples Disability Network is a unique organisation not only domestically but internationally in that we are entirely owned and operated by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with disability. Our board is made up entirely of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people with disability, and our staff either have disability themselves or a close personal association with disability.

Our purpose is to be a voice of and for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with disability and their families. Our functions fall into three key areas, namely Community Engagement which we undertake around the country. Training and education with a particular focus on educating and informing First Nations people with disability about their rights and entitlements as well as educating a range of stakeholders in how to meaningfully support First Peoples with disability. And thirdly we undertake systemic advocacy for the realisation of the human rights of First Peoples with disability and their families. Whilst we are not a direct disability service provider, we do provide unfunded individual advocacy to support for First Peoples with disability and their families around the country. It is with this in mind that we would like to share with you our experiences on behalf of First Peoples with disability with regard the Australian government's response to the Covid-19 Pandemic.

Our advice to governments across Australia at the outset of the Pandemic was threefold. Firstly, we advised that effective and accessible communication of key messages was critical. To this end we took the initiative of developing a series of short films that were in plain English and pictorial in nature to describe the key messages of personal hygiene and social distancing in particular. We also produced an Auslan short film developed by the Deadly Deaf mob for distribution to deaf Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Secondly and critically in our view we immediately sought to get care packs distributed as widely as possible to our community members. We know at FPDN that the majority of First Peoples with disability live in often extreme poverty. We were frustrated by the bureaucratic way in which care packs appeared to be being administered. For example, by such measures as online registration processes. We know such a process is largely inaccessible to many First Peoples with disability and their families. We felt we couldn't wait so when an opportunity to partner with the Alishan charity arose, we jumped at the chance to partner with them. I am very proud to say that as of today we have delivered in partnership with the Alishan charity a total of 1458 care packages throughout NSW and the ACT. It is our understanding that this far exceeds the delivery numbers of any other mechanism currently being employed to distribute care packages to Aboriginal people. What our experience has showed however that many Aboriginal families could do with care packages all of the time not just during this pandemic. This is systematic of the degree of poverty that many Aboriginal families face. The pandemic has only served to highlight the

poverty. We believe there needs to be a coherent programmatic and policy response to addressing poverty amongst Aboriginal people with disability and their families. There are lessons to be learned and we must heed them.

And thirdly in partnership with Professor Cameron Stewart, health lawyer and ethicists from the University of Sydney we developed an *Ethical Decision-Making for First Peoples Living with Disability* policy document. We did this because we were seriously concerned by what we were witnessing overseas particularly in the United States, especially the over representation of African Americans and also African Americans with disability and Americans with disability more generally. We were especially nervous about the potential for Aboriginal people with disability to be triaged out of intensive care because they were very likely to have a number of health indicators that where be seriously detrimental in terms of their perceived capacity to recover from Covid-19. Our ethical statement identified the following 6 key areas of ethical concern.

1. All Federal, State and Territory government agencies must remove disability from consideration of resource allocation when it is used as a broad criterion for exclusion from critical care.
2. State and Federal health authorities must commit to including First Peoples with a disability in planning for decision-making regarding healthcare during the pandemic.
3. State and Federal health authorities must commit to identifying areas of strain and work to re-establish strong relationships of trust and confidence with the First Peoples affected. In cases where that cannot be implemented arrangements should be made to give access to alternative health care resources.
4. State and Territory policies on pandemic health care must expressly refer to the need to be culturally competent when providing services to First Peoples with disability.
5. The state and territory governments must look at how more Aboriginal students can be transitioned into the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health care workforce.
6. State and Territory governments must understand the existential threat and take whatever action is necessary to protect elders as the guardians of First Peoples cultures.

Finally, we do want to congratulate the Commonwealth and State and Territory governments for the success to date in reducing the impact of Covid-19 on First Peoples with disability. This has been a significant achievement. And in many ways, some of our recommendations relate now to either a second wave of the pandemic or can act as an important framework for when the next pandemic was to occur.

A key observation we would make is firstly that the experiences of First Peoples with disability with regard the pandemic have only served to highlight the degree of poverty that many First Peoples with disability and their families experience across Australia. We would also say that the extraordinary and mostly effective way that governments have mobilised to date to address this once in a century type situation surely says to all of us as a society that if we can respond this quickly then surely we have the capacity to address poverty amongst our First nations communities.

Thank you