



**SENATOR THE HON RICHARD COLBECK**

Minister for Aged Care and Senior Australians

Minister for Youth and Sport

Ref No: MC20-032449

The Hon Julie Collins MP  
Shadow Minister for Ageing and Seniors  
Member for Franklin  
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17 AUG 2020

Dear Ms Collins *Julie,*

Thank you for your correspondence of 4 August 2020 concerning the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact across aged care.

The Australian Government is working closely with aged care providers and state and territory public health authorities to support arrangements to manage infection control, and COVID-19 outbreaks in aged care, to best care for and protect our senior Australians.

As you are aware, the Australian Government has been continuously building on our response to COVID-19 in aged care since January 2020, with the Aged Care Sector and with State and Territory Governments and health authorities, incorporating learnings from Australia and other countries.

The Department of Health and I have regularly communicated with the aged care sector with information to support preparation and management of COVID-19 incidents and outbreaks, since late January. This includes through the COVID-19 Preparedness Forum, a regular newsletter with up to date information on COVID-19 and aged care, holding regular teleconferences with providers, peak bodies and consumer peak bodies, holding and participating in webinars, developing free training on COVID-19 and aged care and publishing a range of factsheets and guidance on the Department's website.

The Government released the Australian Health Sector Emergency Response Plan for Novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) as its first line of defence in February 2020. This is supported by the March 2020 the Communicable Diseases Network Australia (CDNA) national guidelines on the prevention and managing outbreaks in aged care. Further advice has been provided by the CDNA and the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC) throughout the outbreak relating to aged care.

Investments in measures to support aged care during the pandemic have exceeded \$850 million dollars so far.

As you are aware, it is already the responsibility of aged care providers to minimise infection related risks under the Aged Care Quality Standards. In addition, on 16 March 2020 the first COVID-19 Infection, Prevention and Control (IPC) training module was released. In addition, specific aged care training modules have been rolled out since 24 March 2020. These modules can be accessed for free through the Department's website at: [www.health.gov.au](http://www.health.gov.au).

These eLearning modules were developed to assist aged care workers to prepare and respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. The topics currently available include:

- Personal Safety
- Families and Visitors – Residential Care
- Families and Visitors – In-Home Care
- COVID-19 and Aged Care
- Outbreak Management Procedures
- Personal Protective Equipment
- Laundry
- Catering
- If you suspect a person has COVID-19
- Working in a home care setting.

As at 13 August, in total there have been over 1 million completions of the nine aged care specific COVID-19 training courses, including personal safety, PPE, outbreak management. The CDNA guidelines also include advice on when and how to wear Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) including masks.

Residential care staff are required to be trained and deemed competent in the proper use of PPE, including donning and doffing procedures. The Department has developed training on PPE for aged care workers, a flowchart on when to wear PPE in aged care and a video on how to wear PPE. These resources are available at: [www.health.gov.au](http://www.health.gov.au) by using the search term 'COVID-19 resources for health professionals'.

The Government is working closely with states and territories, and partners in the aged care sector, to implement national protocols to rapidly identify and respond to COVID-19 impacted facilities, including the deployment of highly skilled personnel. As you are aware, the Victorian Aged Care Response Centre (the Centre) has already been setup to co-ordinate and expand resources to tackle the challenge of COVID-19 in aged care services. A key focus of the Response Centre is to unify the effort across every aspect of the aged care sector during the pandemic. The Response Centre has staff from Commonwealth and Victorian Government agencies. They are working together to manage the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in aged care facilities.

Our approach builds on well-defined relationships between the Department and health emergency managers in states and territories to identify clinical personnel and supporting professionals, including for the Australian Medical Assistance Team (AUSMAT) program – currently deployed in Victoria – together with extensive relationships with the aged care industry.

The Centre is leading several actions on PPE use and training. AUSMAT has deployed members to assess existing procedures and boosting infection prevention and control measures, including on the use of PPE. Allied Health Services are being trained as residential aged care safety officers, to support staff in higher risk facilities in safety, facility operations, and PPE compliance. And ADF staff are being trained in PPE usage and compliance to be deployed to facilities. More training sessions will continue into the coming weeks with the support of the ADF. And a team from the Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission is on the ground making daily visits and delivering unannounced on-the-spot checks on appropriate PPE usage and infection control practices.

On 7 August 2020 the National Cabinet agreed to a paper on Aged Care Preparedness: Lessons from the Victorian Response to COVID-19, and committed to further actions and an audit of state and territory aged care emergency response capabilities.

Over the next two weeks joint Commonwealth-State plans will be developed that include four elements:

- activities such as additional face-to-face infection control training with aged care facilities even where there are no cases of COVID-19
- compulsory use of face masks, workforce controls and the use of private hospital resources that will be actioned in locations where there are active cases of COVID-19
- preparing for the establishment of Coordination centres (similar to the Victorian Aged Care Response Centre) including identifying key staff who will be deployed
- the audit of state and territory aged care emergency response capabilities.

In further support for the workforce, on 20 July 2020, the Australian and Victorian governments, in collaboration with representatives from the aged care sector, announced additional measures to ensure aged care providers are equipped to minimise the spread of COVID-19 and can continue providing quality care. Guiding principles were released on 22 July 2020.

On 4 August 2020, the Support for Aged Care Workers in COVID-19 (SACWIC) Grant Opportunity opened on the Community Grant Hub for Victoria. The grant is open until 31 May 2021. The grant is designed to assist providers to minimise the risk of infection to aged care workers, residents and other consumers of aged care service. Funding will be available to residential and home care providers in Victoria to support their staff to work at a single site, self-isolate and provide alternative accommodation where needed.

In relation to the retention bonus, as previously discussed, the measure is specific to direct care workers in recognition of the particular role they play in caring for our most vulnerable. The grants round to fund providers to make the payment to eligible workers now closed on 14 August 2020. The majority of providers have already applied, had applications approved and funding has begun to flow to providers. The Government is not considering changing the eligibility for the retention bonus and it is expected that funding available will be fully expended within the current eligibility.

I am happy to provide further information in due course. Thank you for raising these matters.

Yours sincerely



Richard Colbeck