

## **MEDIA RELEASE**

18 March 2020

### **Suspend non-essential programs in Aboriginal communities now**

With the COVID 19 pandemic deepening, the Aboriginal Medical Services Alliance of the NT (AMSANT) today called for much stronger measures from the Australian Government to reduce the risk of the spread of COVID 19 into Aboriginal communities by staff of the providers of non-essential programs and services.

“In addition, the government should suspend the participation requirements for the remote Community Development Program (CDP) due to public health concerns associated with the COVID 19 pandemic”, AMSANT CEO, John Paterson said.

AMSANT’s call came in response to recent advice from the National Indigenous Australians Agency (NIAA) in a letter to providers funded under its Indigenous Advancement Strategy, that signaled a ‘business as usual’ approach. NIAA’s CEO wrote that, he expected “that IAS-funded services continue to the fullest extent possible in order to minimise any unnecessary disruptions to serviced communities (be they urban, regional or remote settings)”.

“The advice from NIAA raises public health concerns in the context of the COVID 19 pandemic and increases unnecessary risks of spreading the virus into Aboriginal communities”, Mr Paterson said.

“We have a narrow window of opportunity to prevent the spread of the virus into our communities. As the funder and contract managers of these non-essential programs, the Australian Government must exercise its duty of care to actively direct all non-essential service providers to cease all access to remote communities unless there are extenuating circumstances.”

AMSANT has also released a letter written to the Minister for Indigenous Australians, Ken Wyatt, calling for the suspension of participation requirements of CDP in light of the COVID 19 pandemic on public health grounds. The letter highlighted the need for flexibility for communities and individuals in deciding how to respond to emerging contingencies, and to ensure continuity of welfare income for providing food security, keeping themselves and their families healthy and safe and dealing with other contingencies.

“We are disappointed that the Minister has not responded to our letter”, Mr Paterson said.

“Continuing CDP participation requirements introduces risks for participants, such as requiring them to attend group activities, that are being actively discouraged in the broader community. And maintaining individual requirements, such as to contact Centrelink and apply for personal exemptions is a recipe for disaster when what is required is maximum flexibility to enable swift and decisive action to protect participants.

“We need a clear, consistent and appropriate response that will best support individuals and communities and contribute to the efforts of government and community organisations to deal with this crisis.

“The stakes could not be higher. The risk factors for COVID 19 are greater than the H1N1 virus in 2009, which resulted in death rates among the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population six times higher than the non-Indigenous community and the need for ICU admissions 8.5 times higher. Preventing and slowing the spread of the virus must be our overwhelming priority”, Mr Paterson concluded.

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