

JOINT STATEMENT

Enhanced visitation protections are for public health and safety

Almost 1,000 aged care providers and their representatives have endorsed strong requests for support put to the Aged Care Minister and the Chief Medical Officer during a national webinar.

Everyone agrees that public safety is the most important thing during this national health crisis.

Aged care providers have made extremely difficult decisions for enhanced resident protections on visitation in order to reduce the number of potential exposures to the vulnerable people in our care. This also has huge public health implications in the wider community.

These difficult decisions have not been made lightly and have the support of the majority of residents and their families.

At the same time, we are deeply saddened and concerned by the rising loss of lives in Australian residential care homes where COVID-19 outbreaks have occurred.

We are totally committed to working with families, communities and governments to keep aged care residents and our dedicated workforce protected from COVID-19.

We want to maintain an open and respectful dialogue with the government that acknowledges the difficulties we face. Our aim is to agree nationally consistent guidelines that respect the need for strong infection control and balance this with strong social, mental health and spiritual wellness support.

The nation can be proud of the aged care system, with its passion and commitment minimising coronavirus infections, compared with horrific residential care outbreaks and deaths overseas.

Providers are appealing for:

- A revised statement from the government regarding enhanced resident protections that confirms that in some cases additional restrictions beyond AHPPC guidance are necessary for public health and resident safety.
- A process for the rapid escalation and resolution of case-by-case issues reported by families, residents or advocates, plus a process of guidance sharing for providers on leading practice.
- A timely response to the Aged Care Rescue Package put to the government several weeks ago to meet the increased costs of keeping vulnerable older Australians safe from coronavirus.

Pressures on aged care workers will further intensify from the major costs of controls and resources needed to continue protecting aged care residents and to allow the safe access for visitors that has been stipulated - but there has been little additional support from Government to achieve this.

The funding provided that equates to an average of \$2 per resident per day is not enough for aged care operators to keep winning the fight to keep coronavirus out of aged care homes.

\$2 a day per resident does not cover all the additional requirements such as PPE, cleaning and sanitation, backfilling staff who have to isolate, technology and social distancing measures.

We thank Aged Care Minister Richard Colbeck and the Chief Medical Officer Prof. Brendan Murphy for joining the aged care industry in constructive dialogue in the national webinar, as we work together to care for and support vulnerable older Australians.

However, we impressed upon them that it is incorrect to characterise the sector as having kept residents isolated, under lock and key, in their rooms. Nor are they secret places.

There are widespread communications with families, visits at a distance and extensive social media connections.

It does a disservice to the hundreds of thousands of dedicated aged care staff - working on the frontline and putting their own health at risk - as they work tirelessly to keep residents safe and happy.

Our members report local surveys showing the vast majority of families support the current approach to restricted visitations by their aged care homes.

We also note considerable community concern about potentially unidentified cases and the possibility of asymptomatic cases infecting aged care homes, as we have seen overseas and in Australia.

Providers who have implemented enhanced resident protections are appealing to people to minimise visits, while providers continue their dedication to maintaining connections with their loved ones in care via a range of alternative and innovative communication channels.

In line with the National Cabinet's recommendations, visitation requests for compassionate reasons are being carefully facilitated, in close consultation with residents and families.

Our focus remains on continuing the balance of compassionate care with the protection of our residents and staff.

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