



VACCHO Media Release

More should be done to ensure Aboriginal Communities are well placed to emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Thursday 27 August

The Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (VACCHO) and members of the Aboriginal Executive Council (AEC) say more should be done to ensure Aboriginal Communities are well placed to emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic.

The AEC, a group made up of 11 Aboriginal chief executive officers from Peak Aboriginal organisations across Victoria, today provided evidence to the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee (PAEC) Inquiry into the Victorian Government's Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic.

The AEC expressed its deep thanks to Aboriginal communities across Victoria for their efforts in suppressing coronavirus cases to date. But the group made it clear that more should be done now to ensure the sector is better placed to help Aboriginal Communities affected by disproportionate rates of mental health and social emotional wellbeing issues, as well as justice and correctional issues.

The number of confirmed cases of COVID-19 in Aboriginal Communities is currently sitting at 68, thankfully 58 people have recovered and 10 cases remain active.

VACCHO CEO Jill Gallagher said the low incidence of COVID-19 cases in Victorian Aboriginal Communities was testament to Aboriginal community control, and what can happen when we work meaningfully together.

"Our resilience, connection, and strength during this pandemic has highlighted how successful our holistic and cultural approach to health is," Ms Gallagher said.

"Our ACCOs have been involved in the COVID-19 frontline response since day one. We have worked tirelessly and kept our people safe."

During their submissions to the Inquiry, members of the AEC reminded the State Government what is at stake if there was not a sustained support and investment targeted at the Aboriginal community into the COVID-19 recovery phase.

"We have been thankful for the State Government efforts to date. We have had access to timely and responsive information, but like any partnership under pressure, we feel there are learnings that governments must consider strengthening our relationship in the future," she said.

"If governments do not invest now, the outcomes could be catastrophic. Our ACCO health workers are burnt out and fatigued just like the mainstream population.

"Without targeted supports being delivered now, I worry that our Communities will not be able to access cultural safe services which they need, over the longer-term."

Victorian Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation Inc.

VACCHO is the peak body for the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal peoples living in Victoria.

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Ms Gallagher said VACCHO and its 32 member ACCOs were responding not only to the COVID-19 pandemic, but also to several pressing mental health and wellbeing issues such as the disproportionately high numbers of Aboriginal suicides in Victoria and family violence issues.

Despite the release of a coronial report today showing no increase in Victorian suicide rates under COVID-19, Ms Gallagher confirmed this was not the case with Aboriginal Communities with a spate occurring in Victoria last week alone.

In June, the State Coroner revealed that suicide rates for Aboriginal and or Torres Strait Islander people in Victoria was twice that of the state's non-Indigenous population.

Almost 70 per cent of suicides involved men with 60 per cent occurring in regional areas.

Ms Gallagher said the figures were extremely confronting.

"Every one of those deaths is a person, a family, a valued member of this Community and the ripple effects are felt far and wide. To me, one death is one death too many," she said.

"We know that 2019 marked the highest number of Aboriginal suicides in our Communities on record, and so far, 2020 is tracking slightly above that number compared to the same time last year.

"What is really distressing is we also know that young Aboriginal and or Torres Strait Islander people are most at risk.

"I share the sentiments of the Victorian Coroner that accessible, accurate and culturally responsive data is vital to inform actions across the mental health and suicide prevention sector in our Communities."

The Coroner also found that Aboriginal and or Torres Strait Islander people experienced higher rates of substance abuse and interpersonal stressors (conflict with partners or family) prior to their death.

Contact with the courts was also more than double that of non-Aboriginal and or Torres Strait Islander people in the year before their suicide (34.8 per cent compared to 15.6 per cent).

"We know it has been an incredibly difficult time and would like to thank all of our brothers and sisters for following advice, staying home, looking after your loved ones, keeping our families safe, and our cultures strong," Ms Gallagher added.

If you are feeling like a yarn with someone, the Yarning Safe'n'Strong is a confidential telephone counselling service, run out of VAHS, that operates 24/7. Please give them a call on 1800 95 95 63 or visit www.facebook.com/YarningSafenStrong/

For media inquiries or interview requests please contact Andrew Jefferson on 0400 694 593.

BACKGROUND

VACCHO is the leading advocate for the health of Aboriginal peoples in Victoria and a peak organisation to its membership of 32 ACCOs. VACCHO also works closely with partner organisations, Government, non-Government community sector organisations across Victoria and nationally.

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