



Hon Yvette D'Ath MP
Minister for Health and Ambulance Services
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16 DEC 2021

Mr Neil Laurie
Clerk of the Parliament
Queensland Parliament
George Street
BRISBANE QLD 4000

Dear Mr Laurie ^{Neil}

I write in response to your letter regarding petition number 3619-21, tabled in Parliament on 16 November 2021, in relation to support for aged care residents during future lockdowns.

I note the petitioners highlight the need for additional support and care for vulnerable people living in aged care facilities during recurring lockdowns due to COVID-19, to ensure they are able to see and have the assistance from their family members to help maintain their mental health and wellbeing.

It has been well documented worldwide that the risk of serious illness from COVID-19 increases with age. The rate is higher for those with other serious health conditions or a weakened immune system. It is also widely recognised by medical experts that a key protection against the virus is a high rate of vaccination among populations.

As at 16 November 2021, of the 1,898 deaths in Australia, 845 (around 45 per cent) were aged care residents. This trend is seen worldwide with a disproportionately high mortality rate for residents of aged care during the pandemic. To date, Queensland's proactive actions and measures have ensured the tragic events seen in residential aged care facilities in Victoria and New South Wales have not been replicated here.

During the course of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Palaszczuk Government has placed a great deal of emphasis on protecting the most vulnerable cohorts in the community from the virus, including older people living in residential aged care. For example, safeguards have included mandatory vaccination of staff working at aged care facilities to protect residents to the maximum extent possible from infection and on-transmission.

Another line of defence against COVID-19 in Queensland has been imposing restrictions via the Aged Care Direction during heightened periods of risk when the virus may be circulating in the community. These have included restrictions on visitor numbers and at times lockdowns of residential aged care facilities. I understand the toll these measures have on the residents and their families and friends. The decision to restrict visits to aged care facilities has never been taken lightly.

As vaccine coverage increases both in Queensland and nationwide, the focus has now shifted from an emergency response seeking to eliminate the virus, to managing COVID-19 as an endemic disease that will circulate in the community. *Queensland's COVID-19 Vaccine Plan To Unite Families* (the Vaccine Plan), announced on 18 October 2021, details changes to domestic and international travel to Queensland when Queensland reaches 70 per cent, 80 per cent and then 90 per cent of the eligible population fully vaccinated.

On 9 November 2021, the Queensland Government released *Queensland's Public Health Measures linked to vaccination status – a plan for 80 per cent and beyond* (the PHSM Plan). The PHSM Plan's measures will come into effect on 17 December 2021. These measures will be linked to the vaccination status of people and include a number of restrictions for unvaccinated people. For example, they will not be able visit vulnerable settings, such as residential aged care facilities, except in certain circumstances such as end of life visits.

These measures will provide an important mechanism for protecting aged care residents during the foreseeable future of living with endemic COVID-19. Queensland reached 80 per cent vaccination coverage on 9 December 2021, with efforts continuing to increase the vaccination coverage further. Booster shots are now also available for those who have completed their primary COVID-19 vaccine course five or more months ago.

High rates of vaccination in the community, availability of booster shots, mandatory staff vaccinations and restrictions preventing unvaccinated people to attend aged care facilities will all play an important part in reducing the risk of infection at these facilities and help to reduce the need for visitation restrictions in the future.

I trust this information is of assistance to the petitioners.

Yours sincerely



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