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**Anglicare Australia
Submission to the Select
Committee on Covid-19**

January 2022

www.anglicare.asn.au

About Anglicare Australia

Anglicare Australia is a network of independent local, state, national and international organisations that are linked to the Anglican Church and are joined by values of service, innovation, leadership and the Christian faith that every individual has intrinsic value. With a combined expenditure of \$1.82 billion, and a workforce of 20,500 staff and 9,000 volunteers, the Anglicare Australia Network contributes to more than 50 service areas in the Australian community. Our services are delivered to 450,000 people each year, reaching over 1.33 million Australians in total.

As part of its mission, Anglicare Australia “partners with people, families and communities to build resilience, inclusion and justice.” Our first strategic goal charges us with reaching this by influencing “social and economic policy across Australia with a strong prophetic voice; informed by research and the practical experience of the Network.”

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Introduction

Anglicare Australia appreciates the opportunity to provide a submission to the Senate Select Committee on COVID-19. Anglicare Australia has previously made a submission to the Committee in 2020, outlining our broad vision for moving from crisis to recovery and building back better. Now, as the Omicron variant exposes unprecedented weaknesses in our pandemic response, this submission focuses on the specific and immediate actions that must be taken and the steps needed to help Australia prepare for the impact of future variants.

As a national Network with local reach, our members are directly connected to people bearing the brunt of this pandemic. We also represent a vital workforce of essential community services. The recommendations in this submission focus on protecting communities from the worst impacts of the virus, and ensuring they can continue to depend on the services they need.

It is clear that the COVID-19 pandemic is far from over, and Australia needs to be better prepared for the ongoing impacts it is already causing in 2022. In a matter of weeks, Australia has gone from having one of the lowest daily infection rates in the developed world to one of the highest. We are already seeing the effects this is having on people's ability to access tests, vaccinations, medical supplies and essential goods and services. There will undoubtedly be an additional, significant impact to our economy, and as several health experts have warned, future variants to contend with.

The only way to successfully navigate this situation is with planning, leadership, and cooperation across all levels of government. It is vital to learn the lessons from the first two years of managing the pandemic, heed the advice and warnings of community sector and health experts, and properly plan to manage the health risks, economic chaos, and social disruption that accompanies this virus. Our hope is that the work of this Select Committee will help achieve this goal.

Urgent leadership on current outbreaks

Ensuring a supply of Rapid Antigen Tests (RATs)

The impacts of the pandemic crisis are again hitting people on low incomes much harder than people with greater resources. The health inequities are already chronic and severe. Last year, people on low incomes were dying of COVID-19 at four times the rate of other groups.ⁱ As we battle yet another pandemic wave, with unprecedented pressure on services and the health system, these inequalities will worsen without action.

As the Omicron strain of COVID-19 sweeps across Australia and State and Territory governments have moved away from requiring lab testing to confirm positive cases, rapid at-home tests have become essential. In a country that guarantees healthcare to its citizens regardless of income or background, it is the Federal Government's responsibility to ensure these tests are accessible, available and affordable to everyone. It cannot rely on the private market to manage testing during a pandemic.

Providing free rapid tests will reduce transmission by supporting people to isolate early if they are COVID positive and preventing them from infecting more people. There are high costs to the community's health, and to the economy, if people do not isolate early.ⁱⁱ With costs of tests skyrocketing and the supply non-existent, the Government abdicating its public health responsibility to provide healthcare will cost everyone more in the long run.

The provision of ten free rapid tests to concession card holders is a good start, but will exclude millions of Australians in need. There are known gaps in the concession card system. People who receive support from Centrelink generally have a concession card, but people who work but don't earn enough to raise them above the poverty line often do not. Asylum seekers and international students are usually not eligible. Young people, or women experiencing family violence may not have a concession card as their family income is too high, but they may have limited access to finances controlled by partners or parents. Anglicare Australia also notes that many of our emergency relief clients, accessing support for bills and food, are low-paid workers who do not hold concession cards.

Ten tests will also not stretch far for large families or people who need to test regularly to protect vulnerable family members. Even for those who could get a test for free, the low supply will make it extremely difficult for people to find one. Free rapid tests should be available to everyone, and distributed to community services to provide to anyone who needs them.

The Australian Government's approach is an outlier among developed nations. The United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, and major European and Asian countries have schemes to distribute free or heavily subsidised tests to their citizens. Anglicare Australia joins every other peak health body and leading health experts in calling on the Government to provide universal, reliable and free access to tests. It must also act to ensure ongoing supply to pharmacies, medical centres, other relevant retailers and community service organisations.

Recommendation

Anglicare Australia recommends that Rapid Antigen Tests be made free and universally available to all Australians. The Government must also ensure supply at retailers, healthcare settings, and service organisations.

Supporting the community sector and frontline services

Every day throughout the two years of the pandemic, community service organisations have shown up for their clients and communities. They have provided essential services and helped keep families safe under incredibly difficult conditions.

These staff and services are now being pushed to the limit by the rapidly worsening situation with the rampant spread of COVID-19 infections caused by both the Omicron and Delta variants. With case numbers rising quickly, and more staff isolating, sick or experiencing anxiety and burnout, it's harder than ever for community services to fill rosters. The costs of backfill, cleaning and rapid testing are putting organisational sustainability at severe risk. Some Anglicare Australia Network members report spending tens of thousands of dollars on tests for frontline workers to keep services open, and staff and clients protected. Others have been forced to close their doors temporarily as they do not have enough staff to operate safely.

When community services cease to operate, it leaves people at deadly risk; for example, without food, unable to escape an unsafe home environment, or without home care to help with health and personal tasks.

Community services are in desperate need of additional support and funding to stay afloat. Recent indexation rates have not even covered the rising real cost of delivering services, let alone the increased costs associated with COVID-19. Anglicare Australia calls for a COVID-19 support package for community services to cover these increased costs and ensure that services can remain safely open for those who rely on them. This package would ensure continuity of service delivery, frontline staffing support, and prevent further loss of jobs or income. This support is essential for community organisations who are seeing increases in demand that are not met by new or existing funding.

Recommendation

Anglicare Australia recommends funding a COVID-19 support package for funded community services, that covers the increased costs of service delivery in a pandemic, including rapid testing for staff, clients and visitors.

Keeping emergency relief and frontline services open

It is critical that frontline and essential services can stay open for people who need them. The Omicron outbreak has highlighted the need for a nationally consistent approach for essential workers in frontline services. Frontline workers in sectors such as early childhood education and care, family violence, community healthcare, and many more require consistent guidance on testing

requirements, PPE requirements, and definitions of 'essential worker' covering both paid staff and volunteers.

Anglicare Australia is particularly concerned about pressures on the emergency relief and food relief sector. Tens of thousands of people rely on these services in times of crisis. Although the emergency relief and food relief network are funded and managed by the Federal Government, it has not been provided with any federal government support for testing. Instead, services have simply been asked to advise their Government Area Coordinators of any closures. Without funding and supply for the testing of frontline staff, the Government's current approach will result in closures that could last for days and weeks at a time, leaving Australians stranded in times of need.

Tests are crucial to managing the spread of the virus among frontline staff, preventing them from having to close. Providing tests to these services is critical to slowing the spread among staff and clients, allowing them to continue serving the people who need them.

Recommendation

Anglicare Australia recommends:

- Dedicated funding and support to provide tests to the emergency relief and food relief sectors, and all other Commonwealth-funded frontline and essential workers.
- Working with State and Territory Governments to develop a national approach to ensuring essential workers in frontline service sectors can continue to work safely.

Keeping older Australians safe

The current COVID-19 wave, coming on top of two years of relentless pressure from the pandemic, has knocked out a significant section of the aged care workforce. Many older Australians are dealing with anxiety and isolation, as more residential homes go into lockdown. Others will be put at risk by staff shortages. Aged care providers across the country are reporting that as many as one in four shifts in aged care are going unfilled.ⁱⁱⁱ

This is an emergency. Two years of pandemic hardship had already put the aged care workforce on the brink, and older people at risk. The explosion in Omicron cases has left homes in lockdown and caused serious staff shortages.

Aged care providers cannot resolve this alone. The Federal Government and National Cabinet must step in to guarantee quality care for older Australians. Key among this is an urgent investment in the surge workforce, which is currently failing to meet demand. Logistical and supply problems in relation to tests and PPE must also be resolved as quickly as possible, along with consistent national rules on the use of PPE for close contacts.

Without urgent action, there will continue to be serious consequences for the care of older people. Older people are facing enormous risks from large numbers of workers being stood down. These risks should never be repeated.

Recommendation

Anglicare Australia recommends:

- An urgent review and investment in the surge workforce, which cannot meet current demand.
- A dedicated supply of Rapid Antigen Testing kits for home care staff, which are currently being funded from care budgets.
- Expanding the supply of tests for residential aged care to include families of aged care staff, to slow down and prevent outbreaks in the sector.
- Consistent national rules to provide essential staff that are close contacts with PPE.

Preparing for future outbreaks

The current Omicron variant has shown that Federal, State and Territory governments cannot simply rely on the private sector and market forces to deal with the ongoing pandemic. Australia needs clear and cohesive pandemic planning and a strengthened level of coordination. It is vital that governments across the country learn the lessons from the first two years of managing the pandemic, heed the updated advice and warnings of health experts and policy advocates, and adopt best practice strategies to mitigate the health risk, economic chaos and social disruption that accompanies the virus.

Anglicare Australia notes that economists, health experts, and the community sector have been warning of many of the issues we are currently facing in the pandemic for months. These warnings cannot go unheeded again. We urge the Government to create a Civil Society Crisis Group to advise on these issues as Australia moves into the next phase of the pandemic. We do not support re-establishing the previous COVID Commission which excluded civil society peak bodies and public health experts. It should instead be a collaborative process with community sector representatives, unions, peak health bodies, and business groups. The existence of such a group would have enabled warning of and preparation for the current situation.

Recommendation

Anglicare Australia recommends creating a Civil Society Crisis Group to provide open advice and draw on the strengths and expertise of our networks to manage, and where possible, avert further crises.

A safety net that's up to the challenge

The need to double the JobSeeker payment at the start of the pandemic highlights the fact that Australia's income support payments have been far too low for far too long. A small permanent increase in 2021 came after rates were frozen for almost three decades, and the payment remains hundreds of dollars below the poverty line. In that time, rents in Sydney and other capital cities more than doubled.^{iv} Other living costs like food, education, health, transport, petrol, and electricity have also gone up.^v Put simply, it is past time for a major boost to the payment.

This is reinforced by the findings of Anglicare Australia's most recent Rental Affordability Snapshot, released in April 2021. We found that 0 percent of rental listings would be affordable for a single person on the old Jobseeker payment. Our Snapshot also found that age and disability pensioners were at the very bottom of the market. A person on the Age Pension can afford just 1 percent of rentals, while a person on the Disability Support Pension can afford 0 percent.^{vi} Along with those who are reliant on carer payments, these are the groups most vulnerable to the virus. This highlights the clear need for the age and disability pensions, as well as JobSeeker payments, to be continually reviewed against living costs and the poverty line.

Australia now has the second lowest unemployment benefit in relation to average wages among

other advanced economies, ahead only of Russia. The OECD has reported that Australia's income support payments are insupportably low.^{vii} As a result, these payments now trap people in poverty and are widely recognised as a barrier in themselves to people finding work. This is because the payments for Jobseeker and Youth Allowance are so low, people struggle to meet the costs of looking for work such as transport, childcare, and other essentials. Anglicare Australia's members have reported giving people in their employment programs additional financial assistance to cover costs such as these so they could participate.

In addition to these permanent factors, self-isolating in the midst of a downturn has proven to be expensive, distressing, and exhausting. Families on lower incomes have faced more difficulties learning at home, and for those out of work, these challenges pose additional barriers to gaining employment. The Government correctly recognised in 2020 that income support rates were simply not enough to support people amidst a health crisis. It is now time to ensure that people are permanently protected from the worst effects of the pandemic, and any other crises they may face.

Recommendations: Increasing income support

Anglicare Australia recommends permanently increasing the rates of income support payments above the poverty line. These rates should be permanently reviewed and set by an independent body to ensure they never again fall below the poverty line.

Support for migrants and asylum seekers

At present, asylum seekers, international students and temporary migrants do not have any access to income support including JobSeeker, Disaster Payments, or Medicare. This is a huge concern and one we urge the Committee to take seriously.

Governments have provided emergency and food relief but this does not match the level of need, nor is it an effective way to provide income security for people throughout this crisis. While some people on temporary visas are approaching Anglicare Australia members for help, many are unaware of the existence of services such as emergency relief. Anglicare Australia Network agencies across the country are working with these populations to help them access crisis help. However, emergency relief still will not prevent people from losing their homes or being unable cover the cost of essentials. Self-isolation requirements also make the delivery of emergency and food relief difficult as it can force people to congregate at central locations, increasing the risk of infection.

There is also a major concern about lack of access to healthcare for people not currently eligible for Medicare. In the context of this pandemic, everyone should be able to access free health screening, testing and treatment for the virus regardless of their Medicare or visa status. Anglicare Australia notes that some States and Territories have put in place provisions for people who otherwise do not have Medicare access to receive free or subsidised healthcare. While this is welcome, the Commonwealth has a responsibility to ensure people have access to treatment during this pandemic in the interests of public health.

Recommendation: Migrants and asylum seekers

Anglicare Australia recommends that JobSeeker payments, Medicare access, and other supports be urgently extended to over one million migrants who currently miss out. This remains one of the most serious flaws in the pandemic response and one that must be remedied quickly.

Suspending mutual obligations and debt recovery in the event of outbreaks

At the beginning of the pandemic, mutual obligations were suspended for all Australians on government income payments. Suspensions were reinstated during Delta outbreaks in 2021. However, as payment recipients face the greatest possible danger of infection at any time during the pandemic, the Government has ignored widespread calls to suspend obligations and face-to-face activities.

The speed at which Omicron is infecting people before they can get access to tests and test results means that people looking for paid work are currently being placed in danger while they meet mutual obligation requirements.

Many people subjected to mutual obligations are already sick, caring for others who are sick and need to stay home, so they don't risk infection and transmission. Anglicare Australia also notes that one in four JobSeeker recipients has a disability. To stay safe, many people are needing to effectively 'lock down' or at least reduce social interactions. Similarly, people on the lowest incomes facing debts will be paying at a time when they can least afford it, and when support to challenge the large number of incorrect debts is least available.

Anglicare Australia calls on the government to immediately suspend mutual obligations to safeguard people on JobSeeker and other payments, as well as job service providers while Omicron is placing people in danger. We also call for the immediate suspension of debt recovery.

Most importantly, it is crucial to provide people with certainty that they will not be placed in harm's way by Centrelink obligations, or debt recovery. That means developing a process to ensure obligations and debt recovery processes are immediately suspended in the event of future outbreaks. The definition of outbreak for the purposes of Centrelink obligations should be developed in consultation with the community sector, and with payment recipients themselves.

Recommendation: Suspending mutual obligations and debt recovery

Anglicare Australia recommends that mutual obligations and debt recovery processes be automatically suspended in the event of further outbreaks. This will mean suspending all current obligations, and consulting on a definition covering future outbreaks.

Building the workforce we need

For years, Anglicare Australia has called for investment in job creation in the crucial aged and community sector. The Omicron outbreak has highlighted the fragility of the workforce without this investment. The aged care workforce is widely acknowledged to be in crisis as a result, while other frontline service areas such as disability are on the precipice. Put simply, the current care workforce is on the brink and cannot withstand a further outbreak.

The Omicron variant has revealed that many other essential industries are equally vulnerable. Outbreaks affecting workers in food manufacturing and supply, the logistics supply chain, and essential retail among others are leading to supply shortages across the country. Both industry leaders and people out of work themselves have noted that many people out of work are simply not equipped to fill these positions, which are often wrongly assumed to be unskilled.

There has never been a more important time to do away with pointless obligations and training offerings that people out of work are subjected to replace them with a system that works. Anglicare Australia's research has repeatedly shown that the current system of employment services and training is an expensive failure that is not meeting the needs of the job market, or job seekers themselves. Instead, people out of work should be given the option to participate in meaningful training that equips them to work in areas of known demand, such as the care sector, or the support to gain competencies that are increasingly essential to gaining work. These could include financial support to complete a police check, a working with children or vulnerable people check, training in the use of PPE, first aid, or support to obtain a driver's licence. These offerings are far more useful, and Anglicare Australia anticipates that many people would gladly take them up.

Recommendation: Building and equipping the workforce

Anglicare Australia recommends that the Government work with the community sector, experts, and people out of work to overhaul employment services and training, with a focus on offering opportunities and skills in areas of known need.

Conclusion

Anglicare Australia appreciates the opportunity to contribute to the Select Committee, which is playing a critical role as we learn the lessons from the previous two years and informing plans for the future.

The Omicron outbreak has shown that the COVID-19 pandemic is far from over. Millions of people on lower incomes and in high-risk groups – and the essential services that support them – are struggling with multiple impacts as the latest COVID-19 outbreaks cause havoc and suffering. This submission calls for urgent action to ensure people who are most at risk from the impacts of COVID-19 are protected and the essential services that support them have the resources they need.

As we manage a new phase of rapid, widespread community transmission of COVID-19, many people are missing out on the support they need. Governments at every level must reassess and respond with purposeful, active and decisive leadership. Anglicare Australia stands ready to work with the Government, and this Committee, to deliver this leadership in any way we can.

We would welcome the opportunity to expand further on these recommendations in any upcoming hearings the Committee may hold.

ⁱ ABC News (2021) [Poorer Australians four times more likely to die from a COVID-19 infection.](#)

ⁱⁱ Karnon, J, Bonevski, B and Hossein, HAA (2022) [Free rapid antigen tests makes economic sense for governments, our analysis shows.](#)

ⁱⁱⁱ Brisbane Times (2022) [Help needed to keep COVID-19 out of aged care.](#)

^{iv} Anglicare Australia (2020) [Rental Affordability Snapshot.](#)

^v Deloitte Access Economics (2018) [Analysis of the impact of raising benefit rates.](#)

^{vi} Ibid.

^{vii} Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (2008) [Growing Unequal? : Income Distribution and Poverty in OECD Countries.](#)