



CORONAVIRUS (COVID 19)

# GUIDE FOR RURAL & REMOTE COUNCILS

A general guide to help rural and remote Councils prepare their community and reduce infections.

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**Rural & Remote  
Medical Services Ltd.**

An Australian Medical Charity Since 2001

## **Purpose**

This Guide is intended to provide some general ideas and guidance for local government in rural and remote Australia on preparations for COVID-19. It is not substitute for official advice from the Commonwealth or State governments, and these sources should be relied upon for accurate and up-to-date information and advice on addressing the COVID-19 pandemic in Australia.

## **Background**

When a virus such as COVID-19 breaks out in the community, the most effective strategy is to slow transmission of the virus in the local community. Community protection measures are a set of actions that residents, businesses, community organisations, health services and local government can take to help slow the spread of the disease.

This document sets out some steps that rural and remote councils and communities can take to both prepare for and mitigate community transmission of COVID-19.

## **Aim**

The aim for using protective measures in rural and remote communities with local COVID-19 transmission is to slow the transmission of disease and in particular to protect individuals at increased risk for severe illness, including:

- older adults,
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and
- people of any age with underlying health conditions.

Protective measures are used to minimise illness and avoidable deaths, and reduce the long-term social and economic impacts of COVID-19.

## **Objectives**

1. Increase individual responsibility for implementing recommended personal-level actions (including residents and visitors).
2. Empower businesses, schools, and community organisations to implement recommended actions.
3. Implement settings to ensure continuity of critical infrastructure or services to individuals at increased risk of severe illness.
4. Make sure no one is left isolated or behind.
5. Minimise disruptions to daily life to the extent possible.
6. Minimise the likelihood of local health services being overwhelmed and unable to provide appropriate care to those with severe illness.

# **STEP ONE**

## **Know where to get accurate information**

The Commonwealth and NSW Governments have established web sites with official information about COVID-19 including guides for businesses, tourist operators, health professionals and other services.

As the disease evolves, it is important for the community and rural and remote local councils keep up-to-date with the latest advice and respond appropriately. Below are the official sites for access to information you can rely on:

- Commonwealth Department of Health - <https://www.health.gov.au/news/health-alerts/novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov-health-alert>
- HealthDirect - <https://www.healthdirect.gov.au/coronavirus>
- NSW Government Department of Health  
- <https://www.health.nsw.gov.au/Infectious/diseases/Pages/coronavirus.aspx>

## **STEP TWO**

### **Review your Business Continuity Plan**

Every local council should have a Business Continuity Plan that sets out how the Council will maintain services and infrastructure in the case of natural and other disasters.

Check your business continuity plan to make sure it covers all the relevant risks for your community.

How will you manage critical infrastructure and services such as water treatment, sewerage treatment, waste collection, meals on wheels, community health and other services during any disruption?

Each State and Territory has developed guides that local government can use to review their Business Continuity Planning.

## STEP THREE

### Review your Workplace and Service Policies

Planning now to deal with COVID\_19 will increase community confidence, and ensure that the Council and staff are ready if the virus enters the community. Some of the things you may want to look at include:

1. Review, update, or develop workplace policies to include sick, carers and annual leave utilisation during periods of illness to encourage employees to stay home and notify workplace administrators when sick. Making it easy to take leave will help reduce the risk that an infected employee comes into contact with others and spreading the virus.
2. Review staff training about personal protective measures in the workplace (e.g., proper and regular hand-washing, coughing etiquette, social distancing). See <https://www.healthdirect.gov.au/coronavirus-covid-19-how-to-avoid-infection-fags>.
3. Review cleaning schedules for Council and community facilities such as Council buildings, library, public toilets, sports change rooms, canteens, Council aged care facilities, Council fleet vehicles, Meals on Wheels etc to disinfect frequently touched surfaces daily.
4. Update training for your cleaning staff on safety measures to reduce transmission risk.
5. Develop a new visitor log book keeping details of name, position, organisation, person visiting AND *email and mobile phone contact* so public health authorities can contact visitors and staff if you later find out they have been exposed to someone with the virus.
6. Ensure hand hygiene supplies are readily available in all buildings and facilities including disposable towels and regular safe removal of rubbish.
7. Alter rosters to reduce mixing (e.g. stagger lunch breaks, activity, arrival/departure times)
8. Consider limiting programs with external staff.
9. Consider limiting work-related gatherings (e.g., staff meetings, birthday celebrations, after-work functions)
10. Consider using tele and videoconferencing instead of face to face meetings. If you plan to continue face to face meetings, remember to apply social distancing rules (5ft or 1.5-2 metres distance between chairs).
11. Consider limiting non-essential work travel to the city or large centres where the virus is present.
12. Consider cancelling travel to conferences, forums and other meetings etc.
13. Review service delivery approaches for high-risk populations including ATSI, the elderly and those with existing illnesses to reduce the risk of disease transmission (e.g. when delivering Meals on Wheels etc).
14. Consider regular health checks for staff and volunteers, and implement Council sponsored flu vaccination programs (many staff will be eligible for Fluvax for free under Medicare at their local GP clinic, so talk to your local GP about getting all staff vaccinated straight away). This will reduce the risk of employees becoming sick with the flu, which will reduce their immunity to COVID-

## Flu Vaccinations

Flu vaccinations are available for free under Medicare for certain staff at your local GP clinic. Seasonal flu vaccination provides protection for most people against contracting the flu. It does not work for COVID-19. However, getting the flu may weaken an employee's immune system and make them more vulnerable if they contract COVID-19. Flu vaccinations are generally available for free under Medicare for children from 6 months-10 years, pregnant women, people with chronic disease, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and older people. Talk now to your local GP to book all staff to get a FluVax. GPs will generally provide vaccinations for staff who are not covered by Medicare for a small fee but will need to know numbers as soon as possible.

## **STEP FOUR**

### **Community Leadership & Communication Plan**

Good communication is critical to getting the right information to residents, and reducing unnecessary panic. The Federal Government is responsible for guiding the national strategy to address COVID-19. However, some communications may not reach parts of your community, or may not be delivered in a way that reflects the realities of rural and remote communities on the ground.

For example, some small isolated communities may only have contact with a major centre weekly or monthly. In other cases, members of the community may need help understanding the messages that are being given.

Local Councils have good local knowledge and experience, and have a critical role to play in helping to reinforce national community protection measures, and tailoring messages in a way that reflects local needs.

It is critical in developing your communication plan that Councils reinforce approved national communications locally. Contradictory or different messages locally will undermine community confidence and can contribute to fear and panic. Communications should align with national messages at all times.

While rural and remote communities are typically resilient and stoical, global health issues such as COVID-19 can create understandable concern due to the lack of experience with pandemics, poor communication, inconsistent advice and the perception that major planning is focused on cities and not rural and remote communities.

We recommend that each town develop a community leadership and communication plan following the three 'Cs' approach: "Clear, Comprehensive and Consistent".

Local government, GPs and health professionals are well placed to reinforce national advice and provide trusted information locally.

#### *Clear and Comprehensive*

Work with your local health network, GPs, pharmacists, schools, community services, police etc to develop a clear and consistent message about how your community will deal with the pandemic and set up processes to ensure that everyone is singing from the same song book. Use regular telephone hook-ups or videoconferencing to reduce transmission risks.

Understand and identify your key targets for communication. The way people understand information differs across groups, and messages and methods need to be tailored to meet the needs of everyone. For example, some people may be fearful and messages need to allay unnecessary concern. Other people may not believe that the pandemic is serious and other messages may be needed. Indigenous communities may have more confidence in information that comes from an Aboriginal Medical Service or through local Elders. While Councils need to have a clear message, how that message is communicated both in terms of content and method will differ based on the audience. Identifying your audiences and their unique needs is the first step in good communication.

Councils should also consider their goals (why are we doing this). Goals could include:

- Ensure everyone in the community has access to accurate information by aligning communications with the needs of different groups.
- Inform the community and local businesses about good protection measures and how they can help
- reduce the spread of the disease;
- Inform Council staff about workplace strategies and programs; and
- Alert and remind non-residents and ask for their help in reducing the spread of the virus.
- Increase rational decision-making and reduce unwarranted panic.

The plan and all communications should be published in plain-language.

Communications should be honest and acknowledge that COVID-19 is a serious global pandemic and has the potential to cause very serious illness and death particularly among the elderly, people with pre-existing conditions and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders if the spread is not controlled.

However, also be clear that we have extensive knowledge about how to deal with pandemics from history and that if everyone plays their part, we can reduce the risks for rural, remote and Indigenous communities.

Make sure that your communities understands that we are still learning about this disease and that our understanding may evolve over time. Pretending that we know everything to reassure people will create distrust if things change.

Be very clear that it is everyone's personal responsibility to take protective steps to slow the spread of the virus (even people at low risk of an adverse health outcome such as younger people can still infect others).

#### *Consistent*

Remember, consistency is the foundation of trust!

If Councillors, Council staff or respected members of the community do not follow national advice then this will undermine public confidence in the measures that will keep our communities safe.

## **Need Help?**

For a confidential discussion about the circumstances of your community, or if you need assistance with reviewing your business continuity plans or developing communication and community inclusion plans please call Rural and Remote Medical Services Ltd.

We are happy to just chat and provide some informal advice, or to discuss with you how we might be able to help.

**(02) 4062 8900**

[www.ruralandremotehealth.org.au](http://www.ruralandremotehealth.org.au)

## **STEP FIVE**

### **Develop a Community Inclusion Program**

During the pandemic, there is a risk that some people may become fearful or isolated and fall through the gaps.

We have already seen panic-buying at shops as people grapple with the implications of the virus for their families. We need to help people understand that with effective protective measures we can control this virus over time.

However, there is a risk of some unintended consequences or misinterpretation of public health announcements. For example, some people may respond to advice on social distancing (keeping at a reasonable distance from others in the community) by not attending to elderly neighbours or sick members of the community for fear of transmitting the virus.

Councils should consider developing a Community Inclusion Program to make sure that everyone in the community has a place to call, access to services and that neighbours look out for each other safely.

If infection and mortality rates increase, we can expect that panic reactions will increase that may leave some rural and Indigenous populations vulnerable.

Councils should identify people that may be at greater risk of isolation such as:

- Isolated small remote towns, and Indigenous communities that do not have good access to information, local food supplies, local health services or regular transport services.
- People who become reclusive due to fear of exposure to the virus who may risk their health by not maintaining good nutrition, physical activity, medication programs or social connection.
- People who have existing mental health conditions such as depression or anxiety, and people who may be at risk of developing a mental health condition.

Councils should consider developing a plan involving local clubs such as Rotary, Apex, the CWA and Lions to identify people at risk in the community, and strategies for safely maintaining social connection, and access to service and support, to ensure the long-term physical and mental health of the community.

The Plan could include:

- Library to the Home – delivering disinfected books and videos to resident's homes;
- Online Library – send out a guide to remind residents how to login to the library online resources;
- Home Food Delivery – explore how the community can support people with shopping and other tasks while they are in isolation;
- Council Shop – local councils may consider creating a local store of essential products for vulnerable people who have missed out on getting supplies due to panic buying or who live a long way from the shops and have limited access.
- Phone a Friend – create a social network or telephone support service where people can keep in contact with each other to maintain normalcy in social interaction.
- Social Media Monitoring – social media is a powerful tool for social inclusion, but also a powerful tool for misinformation. Think about dedicating a Council or library officer to monitor key community social media platform and put up corrective information (e.g. links to official health information) to counteract disinformation that may increase panic.
- Mental Health – there is research that shows that natural disasters and health epidemics can have an impact on people's mental health and behaviour. Publicise available telephone and online mental health resources and encourage residents to use them or talk to their local GP.
- Help Options - Promote the Coronavirus Health Information Line in your community - 1800 020 080. If residents get isolated or stuck, encourage them to call their doctor or emergency services if urgent.



# OUR VISION

## HEALTHY RURAL & REMOTE COMMUNITIES

Rural and Remote Medical Services has developed a web page for rural and remote communities on COVID-19, including free posters that can be downloaded to support protective strategies in your community.

<https://www.ruralandremotehealth.org.au/covid19>



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