

30th April, 2020

Dear Prime Minister,

I and my whole board are writing to you to raise our concern about the confusion caused by recent comments made by you about visitors to aged care. These comments have added further distress and angst for members of our community already struggling with the significant disruption of COVID19 to their lives.

Like many other aged care providers Warrigal has had to make some difficult decisions over the last 6 weeks. These decisions have been based on the clinical challenge of protecting over 800 residents across 9 residential care homes in the face of a once in 100 year pandemic. Our initial position on visitation to our homes closely followed the government's minimum advice; however our risk assessment processes quickly identified the need for even tighter restrictions to avoid devastating health consequences for vulnerable people with multiple co-morbidities exposed to many staff each day.

The risk assessments undertaken by Warrigal identified a number of key systemic risks that are largely beyond our control. Despite our best endeavours these risks could not be controlled nor mitigated to an acceptable level. Notwithstanding this challenge, Warrigal did not adopt a set and forget approach, but rather we have chosen to seek opportunities to increase social connectivity via technology and increased staffing. The feedback from most residents and families has recognised our efforts in dealing with these unprecedented times through restricted access to their loved ones and specific applications for certain people in certain categories to visit.

This singular focus is not without a significant financial cost. Despite facing significant financial pressures prior to the emergence of COVID19, Warrigal and many other aged care operators have increased staff numbers and are bearing an increased cost burden that is well beyond the additional revenue support that has been announced to date. The aged care rescue package delivered to your government several weeks ago, and being sought by the seven key aged care peak organisations, is urgently needed to sustain our organisation and its services to vulnerable people.

Warrigal commenced over 50 years ago as a volunteer led charity to fulfil a community need that exists to this day. Our founders identified the absence of aged care services between Wollongong and the Victorian border and set about creating a service to provide care in a largely forgotten socio economic community. The organisation has grown in size, scale and capability – however our mission and purpose remain the same – creating better lives for older people. With this in mind, and taking the lead of our founders, Warrigal has continued to place the interests of our residents and community front and centre, never more than now in the face of a public health crisis that targets vulnerable older people.

The PM's recent criticism and implicit threats to aged care operators could be taken to suggest a degree of neglect and maliciousness that is far from the truth of the matter. As a cohort, residents in aged care residential homes are among the safest and most socially engaged individuals compared to their contemporaries in the wider community. It should not be forgotten that the current Government general community guidelines recommend that people over 70 should take additional precautions, and that their family members should avoid visiting them. Given this, the call for winding back restrictions in residential aged care homes is premature to say the least. It is dangerous and inconsistent with restrictions on other older people in our settings, eg the family home. This is why the community is confused and distressed.

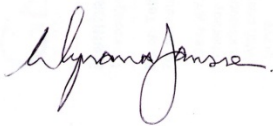
The argument that Warrigal (and other providers) should loosen visitor restrictions based on the fact that there have been no confirmed COVID19 cases is a pointless argument. The positive outcome to date largely demonstrates the efficacy of Warrigal's risk mitigation strategy rather than disproving our approach. Given the high mortality experienced in aged care homes overseas it could be argued that the tighter restrictions in place in the majority of Australian aged care homes has been a critical contributor to the positive Australian experience.

In the coming months there will be an opportunity for a loosening of restrictions across the community and in preparation for this time Warrigal has identified opportunities to introduce more options to encourage connectedness between residents and families. This will include the introduction of Safe Visitor Areas, upgrades to Wi-Fi and the rollout of a Social Connection Strategy. However, the speed and sequence of Warrigal winding back our access restrictions will not be compromised.

The Board and management look forward to a time when we can all look back on this time when the crisis has passed and reflect on what we have achieved together. However, in the meantime we would appreciate you acknowledging the success of the aged care sectors decisions and the need to continue to focus on improving and protecting the lives of the 1900 people living and working in our homes. My Board feels so strongly about this that they resolved to all sign this letter as a show of solidarity. Your total focus on public safety, especially the safety of our oldest Australians would be appreciated. To do otherwise would be a grave injustice to all those who have been entrusted in your, and our, care.

I recommend you change your advice to aged care providers to avert a potential disaster.

I can be contacted by phone on 0412 392 441 if you wish to discuss this further.



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