



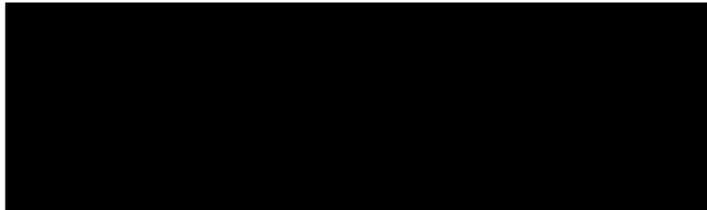
24 November 2020

The Hon. Fiona Patten MLC
Parliament of Victoria
Legislative Council, Legal and Social Issues Committee
Parliament House
EAST MELBOURNE VIC 3002

Dear Ms Patten,

Re: DHHS Public Health Officers and Contact Tracing

I write further on behalf of Public Health Officers (PHOs) and our other members employed by the Department of Health and Human Services who have worked in COVID response performing contact tracing to provide an additional statement by them for your Committee's consideration.



KAREN BATT
State/Federal Secretary
CPSU SPSF Group Victorian Branch



“The public health officers want the inquiry to understand we gave everything we had to protect Victorians.

We grew a team of fourteen public health officers to thousands of contact tracers in the space of a few months. We started on the backfoot as the scale of the pandemic demanded immediate additional funding of the public health system. Of course, there were improvements to be made in relation to processes and technology (similar to other states) and as the second wave hit everyone worked tirelessly to achieve them. The dedication from the team in responding to this pandemic, training thousands of new staff, managing daily operations, leading projects, people management, managing stakeholders and complaints, constantly moving into new roles as the situation developed was relentless.

Public health officers need to be highly skilled at interviewing, we must build a quick rapport with a stranger on the phone during a highly stressful period and elicit very personal information. Public health officers must be part detective, negotiator, health advisor, counsellor, social worker and law enforcer, balancing people’s privacy and the risk to the wider community. It was not uncommon that we called the police when people threatened violence or self-harm, called ambulances when we believed cases needed medical support or when cases didn’t answer their phones. We also logged thousands of support payments, food packages and accommodations arrangements to help cases and contacts to safely isolate and quarantine.

Yes, the contact tracing system was overloaded, and short comings were evident, but every Victorian each had a part to play as well and the Victorian public compliance deteriorated amidst constant mainstream media hostility contributing to a lack of confidence in the system. Despite the complaints and levels of escalating aggression, we turned up and did it all again the next day. This was done in an environment that was forever changing as new information on this virus came to light and as it spread throughout the community.

During the second wave the morale of the PHOs was tested, and the physical and emotional impact on staff was visible but people continued to work long hours. What was said about us in the media was untrue and hurtful and this only increased our feelings of failure, especially after the hours and personal sacrifices we had put in. The pressure never ended, daily you would find someone crying in the office. The pressure and stress we went through has had a continuing impact on many PHOs.

To the Victorians that did the right thing and stayed apart, we know it hurt, we say thank you. To the case and contacts who offered words of encouragement and thank you, you all made it easier to get out of bed and do it all again the next day.

The public health officers remain proud of the work they have done for Victoria.”