



## Loddon Mallee Aboriginal Reference Group

### **Submission to the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee inquiry into the Victorian Government's response to the Covid-19 pandemic**

13 August 2020

#### **Background**

The Loddon Mallee Aboriginal Reference Group (LMARG) is a consortium of Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs) which includes Bendigo and District Aboriginal Cooperative in Bendigo, Njernda Aboriginal Corporation in Echuca, Murray Valley Aboriginal Cooperative in Robinvale, and Mallee District Aboriginal Services delivering in Mildura, Swan Hill and Kerang.

#### **The LMARG response to the pandemic**

COVID-19 is a serious public health risk for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and Aboriginal organisations have been generally applauded for their work to keep communities safe. The response by LMARG members was rapid and to date measures implemented locally to slow the spread of disease, have been effective in protecting LMARG communities.

The LMARG members multi-pronged approach has included health messaging, special support for Elders and vulnerable community members, and restructuring program delivery including conducting business by telephone and video. However, this health emergency has revealed the gaps in our service system and new gaps have emerged.

This document provides feedback to the response from the Victorian Government and ways to alleviate the impact of COVID-19 on Aboriginal communities in regional Victoria, such as Loddon Mallee. It was developed in consultation with the CEOs and senior staff from the LMARG membership and endorsed by the LMARG CEOs.

#### **The Victorian Government response**

**Self Determination:** At the outset, members were pleased that ACCOs were recognised by the Victorian Government as essential services for protecting Aboriginal communities across the State. The importance of self-determination and the active engagement of Aboriginal organisations in pandemic preparedness, response, and management<sup>1</sup> must continue in the recovery phase. It is critical that recent advances by the Victorian Government in supporting self-determination are not lost in the clamour of responding to the pandemic.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.mja.com.au/journal/2020/first-nations-people-leading-way-covid-19-pandemic-planning-response-and-management>

We appreciate the support we have received from the Victorian Government to date, but we do have some areas for improvement including:

**Streamlining communication:** At the outset, members were inundated with information and invitations to attend briefings. Early designation of a central point of communication would have allowed us to focus on the task at hand with less distraction. The establishment of local area COVID19 Aboriginal Leadership Committees is a welcome development.

**Reporting on local responses to COVID-19:** Because ACCOs provide a complex suite of services across multiple disciplines, initially, members were overwhelmed by requests for reports on top of regular reporting schedules. We were also asked to provide updates and information through multiple government department channels while being assured that departments would be flexible around reporting requirements.

The announcement of the *Aboriginal COVID-19 response and recovery funding package* is welcomed and will assist us to address other areas of concern including:

- **Family violence:** Members were not sufficiently resourced to respond to the increase in family violence associated with physical isolation.
- **Mental Health:** Many community members are experiencing high levels of stress, anxiety and deteriorating social and emotional wellbeing and additional funding will assist our response.
- **Homelessness:** Homelessness is as much an issue in regional Victoria as in metro areas. The pandemic is an opportunity to address underlying causes of homelessness and to support community members into more secure housing.
- **Sourcing supplies:** Members worked with the Murray Primary Health Network to access Personal Protection Equipment for our health services but initially struggled to access supplies for family violence and accommodation/residential services including Aged Care and Out of Home Care, and food and household supplies for vulnerable community members.

We look forward to working closely with the Victorian Government to resolve any arising issues at this difficult time and would welcome the opportunity to expand on this submission at a hearing.

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