

8 July 2020

**ELLEN
SANDELL MP**
STATE MP FOR MELBOURNE

The Hon. Daniel Andrews
Premier
1 Treasury Place
Melbourne, Victoria
Australia, 3002

By email: Daniel.andrews@parliament.vic.gov.au

Dear Premier,

Inquiry into the management of the 'hard lockdown' of Flemington and North Melbourne public housing towers

The Greens have whole-heartedly supported the Government's health-led response to the COVID-19 crisis. However, as elected local representatives, over the last five days we have become increasingly alarmed and concerned for residents in North Melbourne and Flemington public housing. We have serious concerns about the way lockdown of their homes has been managed.

We appreciate that this is an unprecedented situation, but we remain deeply concerned that residents were locked in their homes without access to essential provisions, such as food and medicine, or even any information about how they would receive such provisions.

Five days later, there is still much confusion about the chain of command and coordination of services, which is preventing residents from receiving the care and support they need. We are concerned for both the physical and mental health of residents.

Over the last five days we have been speaking to many residents and local organisations and have heard directly about a number of highly distressing incidents.

These include:

- An elderly diabetic woman who relies on daily care workers to cook and clean for her had the care removed, with no information for three days about how she would access food and care.
- A woman was unable to provide expressed breastmilk for her premature baby, who was in a nearby hospital.
- A mother unable to get clean needles for her diabetic 6-year-old child, despite calling DHHS and other support services multiple times, leading to her needing to re-use needles.
- A mental health check not being done for a woman who had threatened self harm.
- A mother informing authorities that her child had a high fever but was initially advised that an ambulance would not be allowed to attend.
- A woman who waited in the foyer for half an hour to receive food only to be told that the food had run out.
- A man requested urgent ventolin, which he needed to use every 4 hours, through the DHHS hotline, but it was not provided until two or three days later.

ELLEN SANDELL
STATE MP FOR MELBOURNE
t: (03) 9328 4637 e: office@ellensandell.com
146-148 Peel St, North Melbourne VIC 3051

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- Children's packs not being delivered after five days, despite being requested.
- Multiple cases of people needing medication and not being given information about how they could access it and significant delays in receiving essential medication.
- Families who received food that did not comply with their noted allergies in the DHHS provided 'care packages', and people who received food staples that could not be used without other staples which were not provided e.g. weetbix were provided without milk, jam was provided without bread.
- A local school being denied the ability to give devices/laptops to their students - which still were not delivered five days later.
- Residents not getting sufficient or culturally appropriate food for two to three days.
- Lack of management of food distribution between the nine towers, leading to City of Melbourne and the State Control Centre being called in to take over after two or three days.
- The SES removing and taking away packages that had been delivered for specific residents.
- Residents repeatedly asking for information about services and not being given any relevant information.
- Residents not being doorknocked with any information or outreach for several days.
- Residents not being provided with the hotline number, and consequently not knowing how to request essential services.
- Information provided over loudspeakers being inaudible, leading to people congregating in lifts and communal spaces to try to hear the messages, at risk of spreading coronavirus.
- Information provided over loudspeakers only being communicated in limited languages which resulted in many people not understanding the messages.
- Residents not being given translated information about the lockdown.
- Very little engagement or communication with local African community leaders, leading to mass confusion.
- Lack of communication with the local mosque who were fielding questions and requests from residents in the towers (their family and friends), and who had become a pop-up food and essentials distribution centre. This led to daily confusion, and often they were denied the ability to deliver essential supplies to the towers for people who had requested them, in some instances leading to confrontations with police.
- Lack of clarity on the role of police leading to confusion and the unnecessary blocking of food and other essentials being allowed to be distributed to residents.
- Police being sent in without information, and being the only presence on the ground for a long period of time, in a community with a history of discriminatory policing (pertinently Operation Molto).
- Residents being provided with conflicting advice about how and when COVID-19 testing would occur, leaving many residents concerned about having to congregate in the foyer together to be tested.
- Residents not being told what will happen to them if they test positive for COVID-19 and whether they will be taken to another location.

In light of these examples, which are just a small sample of what residents have experienced, we are writing to request an independent inquiry into the management of the 'hard lock-down' of the public housing towers in Flemington and North Melbourne (with investigation to commence after the current restrictions on the public housing towers are lifted, so as not to unnecessarily divert resources).

While we do not propose that the inquiry investigate the health rationale behind the lockdown decision, we ask that the inquiry investigate the decisions taken by the government concerning the implementation of the lockdown, as well as the management and execution of the lockdown itself.

The inquiry should investigate and publicly report on:

- The failure to plan for and deliver adequate and appropriate food, medicine and other essentials to residents from the time the lock-down was put in place, noting many residents waited several days for appropriate food and other essentials to be delivered;
- The effect on residents of being prevented from receiving urgent medical care and essential provisions, including the considerable distress and harm they suffered;
- How communication to residents about the lock-down was managed, given the level of confusion amongst residents;
- The mismanagement and inconsistent rules for community groups delivering much needed food and other supplies to residents;
- The failure of coordination of services on the ground, how and why decision-making structures changed over time, and the reasons and timing for ultimately bringing in the State Control Centre;
- The role of DHHS and whether they were the appropriate body to be tasked with the coordination of the non-policing elements of the lockdown;
- The directions issued to police and the extent to which they promoted a health-led response to the lock-down;
- The adequacy of contracts issued by DHHS to workers transporting goods inside the public housing towers and any other relevant contracts;
- The extent to which the failure to adequately maintain existing public housing, and to adequately fund the creation of new public housing, contributed to the problem;
- Any related and relevant matters.

Similar to the inquiry into the outbreaks arising from quarantine hotels, it is vital the Victorian public and, most importantly, the residents of public housing, have answers to what has gone wrong with the management of the lock-down and can be confident the government will learn all relevant lessons from this experience.

Yours faithfully,



Ellen Sandell MP



Adam Bandt MP



Cr Rohan Leppert