

28 January 2022

Hon Michael Sukkar MP
Assistant Treasurer
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Minister,

Pre-Budget Submission

Covid Safety for Front-line Community Services

The 2022-23 Budget presents an opportunity to enact policies that bring Australians together and overcome the extraordinary challenges we've faced during the pandemic.

UnitingCare Australia welcomes the opportunity to make a submission regarding the essential needs of the community services sector ahead of the 2022-23 Federal Budget.

UnitingCare Australia is the national body for the Uniting Church's community services network and is an agency of the Assembly of the Uniting Church in Australia. We give voice to the Uniting Church's commitment to social justice through advocacy and by strengthening community service provision.

With 1,600 sites, we are one of the largest networks of social service providers in Australia, supporting 1.4 million people every year across urban, rural, and remote communities. The UnitingCare network has over 50,000 staff and 30,000 volunteers.

In making the following submission on behalf of the UnitingCare network we note that UnitingCare Australia, as a member of the Australian Aged Care Collaboration, has already made comparable requests on behalf of the aged care sector.

We would like to thank the Government for its ongoing commitment to the safety and wellbeing of all Australians. Recognising this commitment, we would like to highlight our sincere concern for front-line community sector workers and the communities they serve. In doing so, we ask for your consideration within the 2022-23 Budget of four important requests:

- Free Rapid Antigen Tests (RATs) supplied to all community service workers,
- Free Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) supplied to all community service workers,
- A modest community service grant top-up to meet increased costs of Covid-safe practice, and
- A standing Government Advisory Committee with the express purpose of advising Cabinet of important changes, opportunities, and challenges through the next stage of the pandemic.

RATs, PPE and Community Service Grant Top-Up

The immediate health impacts of Covid-19 have forced many services to adapt and limit how they care for our communities. This has been unavoidable. However, we are increasingly seeing services slashed because of Covid related financial pressure; the cost of RATs, cleaning, PPE and backfilling staff are overwhelming the sector.

Our community services need more support. A survey undertaken within our service network found supplies of RATs, PPE, and a modest additional grant (of current Federal grant funding) would enable most providers to meet Covid-safety costs.

Many of our providers have commented on the shift from triaging to cutting, with one Service Manager noting that “we are no longer prioritising, now we are rationing”. Without urgent access to free RATs, PPE and additional funding to meet Covid-safety costs, community services will continue to reduce and may face forced closure.

Standing Government Advisory Committee

We have been grateful for the frequent communication and strong engagement UnitingCare Australia and our network organisations have enjoyed with the Minister for Social Services and her Office. We also believe that strong and timely policy development would be aided by a Standing Government Advisory Body drawing on representation from the community sector, business, unions, and health organisations. This Body would arm the Government with essential information ahead of time as we combat Covid through Omicron and any further variant outbreaks.

The settings put in place by the 2022-23 Budget will determine the strength of the Australian community sector and the Australian community. I strongly commend these four policy proposals to your consideration within this Budget process.

Warmest regards,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be "Claerwen Little".

Claerwen Little
National Director