

2021

**THE LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE
AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY**

**Chief Health Officer Report on the Status of the Public Health Emergency due to
COVID-19 Report 18 – 8 September 2021**

**Presented by
Rachel Stephen-Smith MLA
Minister for Health
16 September 2021**



ACT
Government

ACT Health

Ms Rachel Stephen-Smith MLA
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Dear Minister

CHIEF HEALTH OFFICER REPORT ON THE STATUS OF THE PUBLIC HEALTH EMERGENCY DUE TO COVID-19 – 8 SEPTEMBER 2021

Please find herein my report to you, as Minister for Health, in relation to the declaration of a public health emergency in the ACT due to COVID-19.

Section 119 (4B) of the *Public Health Act 1997* provides that if the “COVID-19 declaration has been extended or further extended under subsection (4), the chief health officer must advise the Minister at least every 30 days about—

- (a) the status of the emergency; and
- (b) whether the chief health officer considers the declaration is still justified.”

Minister, my advice is that COVID-19 continues to pose a public health risk to the ACT community, particularly as the ACT is under lockdown restrictions. My recommendation to you, as of 8 September 2021, is that the public health emergency declaration in the ACT remain in place at this time.

All Australian jurisdictions are maintaining public health emergency status or similar at this time and continue to focus on the suppression of COVID-19.

Yours sincerely

Dr Vanessa Johnston
Acting Chief Health Officer
8 September 2021

CHIEF HEALTH OFFICER REPORT ON THE STATUS OF THE PUBLIC HEALTH EMERGENCY DUE TO COVID-19 – 8 SEPTEMBER 2021

Declaration of a public health emergency in the ACT

A public health emergency declaration is in force in the ACT due to the public health risk of COVID-19 to the ACT community. As Chief Health Officer, I make a recommendation to the Minister for Health that the public health emergency declaration remain in place due to the ongoing public health risk COVID-19 presents.

The public health emergency declaration enables me, as Chief Health Officer, to take necessary actions to reduce threats to public health, including issuing public health directions that aim to limit the spread of COVID-19 in our community. These directions include the requirement for returned international travellers to undertake hotel quarantine and for confirmed cases of COVID-19 and their close contacts to self-isolate.

The ACT's public health response to COVID-19 is guided by the advice of the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC) and National Cabinet.

Global situational update

Globally, as of 6 September 2021, there have been 220,563,227 confirmed cases of COVID-19, and sadly 4,565,483 deaths reported to the World Health Organization (WHO)¹.

The number of new cases across the world has remained stable over the past month with over 4.4 million cases reported in the last week. The United States of America (USA), India, the United Kingdom, the Islamic Republic of Iran and Brazil reported the highest number of new cases. The total number of deaths has declined in most regions except for The Americas and Europe which have seen an increase in the number of deaths reported by 17 per cent and 20 per cent respectively.

The Delta variant remains the dominant strain of COVID-19 circulating in a number of countries, including Australia, and is increasing in countries where vaccination rates remain below the modelled threshold for widespread protection against outbreaks.

National situational update²

As at 9:00am on 8 September 2021, there have been a total of 64,628 cases of COVID-19 reported in Australia and 1,053 deaths. Nationally, there were 10,022 new locally acquired cases reported in the past seven days, with an additional 34 overseas acquired cases. The vast majority of locally acquired cases in the past 30 days were associated with the Greater Sydney Outbreak. Across Australia, there is currently an estimated 27,797 active cases and 1,278 cases hospitalised.

¹ <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/situation-reports> Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) Weekly Epidemiological Update and Weekly Operational Update, accessed 8 September 2021

² <https://www.health.gov.au/news/health-alerts/novel-coronavirus-2019-ncov-health-alert/coronavirus-covid-19-current-situation-and-case-numbers# covid19-summary-statistics> Coronavirus (COVID-19) at a glance – 7 September 2021, Australian Government Department of Health, accessed 8 September 2021

Over the past month, COVID-19 case numbers have increased in several jurisdictions with outbreaks in New South Wales and Victoria continuing to grow. Queensland, South Australia, Western Australia and the Northern Territory also recorded new positive cases. Lockdowns have continued in NSW and Victoria, and the Northern Territory implemented a short lockdown for Greater Darwin and Katherine from 16 August 2021 which was lifted for Greater Darwin at noon (ACST) on 19 August 2021 and 24 hours later for Katherine.

In response to the outbreaks in NSW and Victoria, the ACT declared both states as COVID-19 Affected Areas. In response to the situation in the Northern Territory, the ACT introduced stay-at-home requirements for anyone travelling from Greater Darwin and Katherine after 6:00pm (AEST) on 16 August 2021, which were lifted at 12:30pm (AEST) on 20 August 2021.

New South Wales situation

In NSW, the COVID-19 situation is continuing to evolve with 26,853 active locally acquired cases in the state reported as at 8:00pm on 7 September 2021.

The NSW Government implemented stay-at-home orders for all of regional NSW from 5:00pm on 14 August 2021 following the detection of positive cases in several local government areas that were not already under stay-at-home orders. Greater Sydney, Central Coast, Blue Mountains, Wollongong and Shellharbour remain under similar stay-at-home orders as case numbers continue to rise.

The ACT declared the entire state of NSW as a COVID-19 Affected Area from 5:00pm on 12 August 2021 due to an increase in positive cases reported in areas outside of the Greater Sydney region. Travel restrictions are currently in place for anyone travelling from NSW to the ACT including the requirement for all travellers (including ACT residents) to obtain an approved exemption prior to entry.

The ACT has enacted a standing exemption for NSW residents living in the region surrounding the ACT, which permits entry to the ACT for the approved essential reasons under the ACT's lockdown restrictions. NSW residents who live in the following approved postcodes are permitted to enter without an exemption: 2581, 2582, 2584, 2611, 2618, 2619, 2620, 2621, 2623, 2626. Anyone who resides outside of these postcodes and needs to enter the ACT for essential work or healthcare reasons is required to seek an exemption.

Standing exemptions have also been developed for NSW residents who live within the Southern NSW Local Health District or in the NSW Local Government Areas of Cootamundra-Gundagai, Hilltops, Junee Shire, Snowy Valleys and Wagga Wagga (parts of the Murrumbidgee Local Health District) to permit entry into ACT health facilities for urgent or critical health care.

ACT Health has received 25,970 exemption requests from NSW travellers since the introduction of travel restrictions for some NSW local government areas between 20 June and 9:00am on 8 September 2021. Of these applications, 10,818 have been approved, 7,414 have been declined, 4,997 have been withdrawn or an exemption is not required under the Public Health Direction and 2,741 applications are yet to be processed or require further information.

The situation in NSW will continue to be monitored by ACT Health, with a particular focus on the region surrounding the ACT.

Victoria situation

In Victoria, the COVID-19 situation has continued to evolve since Greater Melbourne entered lockdown on 5 August 2021. Case numbers continued to grow in Greater Melbourne following the commencement of the lockdown period with cases seeding into regional Victoria. The Victorian Government broadened the lockdown to the entire state of Victoria on 22 August 2021. The ACT applied stay-at-home requirements for anyone travelling to the ACT from Greater Melbourne on or after 11:59pm on 5 August 2021. Following the introduction of the state-wide lockdown, the ACT declared Victoria as a COVID-19 Affected Area from 6:00pm on 22 August 2021, which requires all travellers (including ACT residents) to seek an exemption before entering the ACT.

Up until 9:00am on 8 September 2021, ACT Health has received 580 exemption applications to enter the ACT. 265 applications have been approved, 105 applications have been declined, 159 applications are awaiting processing or require further information, and 51 were withdrawn or an exemption is not required under the Public Health Direction.

ACT situational update

Current outbreak and lockdown restrictions

The ACT is currently in lockdown due to a positive case of COVID-19 with no known source of transmission identified on 12 August 2021 and positive wastewater detections also reported at the same time. The individual had been infectious in the community and visited a number of public locations. Additional cases were detected in the community in the days after the first case with four positive cases recorded on 13 August 2021, and daily cases reported in the days following.

A number of clusters have since been identified with transmission linked to several education facilities, early learning centres, bars, public housing sites, and retail businesses.

As of 8:00pm on 7 September 2021, there have been a total of 424 cases linked to the current ACT outbreak. There are 231 cases currently active, 10 of which are in hospital, with two cases in intensive care and one requiring ventilation. A total of 193 cases associated with the current outbreak have recovered. Of the ACT's 548 cases since the start of the pandemic, 314 cases have recovered, and sadly there were three deaths early in the pandemic.

As at 8:00pm on 7 September 2021, the majority of cases in the current outbreak have been locally acquired and linked to a known case or cluster (87 per cent; 368 of 424). A small proportion of cases remain unlinked (9 per cent; 38 of 424). To date, two cases (0.5 per cent; 2 of 424) have been identified as having been acquired interstate from an unknown source. A number of new cases remain under investigation and will be classified as linked or unlinked as interviews are undertaken.

As at 11:59pm on 7 September 2021, the total number of vaccine doses administered by the ACT Government is 230,961.

As of 9:00am on 8 September 2021, there are 3,250 people in quarantine in the ACT being supported by ACT Health. 1,584 of these individuals are identified close contacts of locally acquired cases and 1,655 individuals are from COVID-19 Affected Areas. Additionally, the ACT is continuing to manage the return of diplomats and government officials travelling to

Canberra for official duties. ACT Health is operating a dedicated quarantine facility at the Australian National University Liversidge Court Apartments to support individuals who test positive for COVID-19 and cannot isolate at home, as well as quarantine of a small number of close contacts and secondary contacts.

The ACT's outbreak response has extended to supporting residents in public housing complexes following the identification of positive cases linked to two sites to date. A multi-agency response is providing significant support to quarantined residents including through the delivery of food and other essential items, mental health support and on site COVID-19 testing and vaccination.

As of 9:00am on 8 September 2021, there are 354 active exposure locations across the ACT and a total of 821 exposure locations have been identified since the start of the outbreak on 12 August 2021. ACT Health has identified 14 locations where public transmission has occurred with six of these sites currently considered active sites of transmission.

Implementation of lockdown for the ACT

Following the detection of the initial positive COVID-19 case in the ACT, the Chief Health Officer signed the *Public Health (Lockdown Restrictions) Emergency Direction 2021 (No 1)* (the Lockdown Direction) to formally implement the ACT's lockdown with effect from 5:00pm on 12 August 2021. The lockdown was initially scheduled to conclude at 5:00pm on 19 August 2021, however due to the epidemiological situation in the ACT and surrounding region, on 17 August 2021 it was announced that the lockdown would be extended for two weeks until 5:00pm on 2 September 2021.

On 31 August 2021, it was announced that the lockdown would be extended for a further two weeks until 11:59pm on 17 September 2021 due to the number of new cases being notified, including the number that were in the community for part of their infectious period, which presents a significant risk of COVID-19 spreading in the community.

Refinements were made to the Lockdown Direction which took effect from 2 September 2021 to provide relief to some businesses and the broader community and allowed for some lower-risk outdoor activities to take place, particularly acknowledging the wellbeing benefits of being outdoors. This included the reopening of outdoor playgrounds, fitness stations and dog parks, a small increase in the number of people permitted to attend weddings, funerals and religious ceremonies which are time critical.

The refinements also allowed non-essential small retail business to operate click and collect services, outdoor essential services to occur where physical distancing can be maintained such as essential maintenance and landscaping, and real estate businesses to allow one person at any one time to conduct property inspections required by law for the sale of a property to proceed. The construction sector was partially reopened under strict COVID Safe requirements to minimise the risk of exposure and transmission at construction worksites across the ACT.

Under the current Lockdown Direction, a range of public health, business and gathering restrictions remain in effect to limit movement across the Territory and reduce the risk of further transmission of the virus. These restrictions include the requirement for all people in

the ACT to stay at home and not leave their residence other than for one or more of the permitted reasons including, but not limited, to:

- obtain food or other essential goods or services;
- access essential health care;
- perform essential work;
- undertake a COVID-19 test or receive a scheduled COVID-19 vaccination; and
- engage in physical or recreational activity in an outdoor space, for no more than two hours per day, with anyone in their household or no more than five people.

Anyone aged 12 years and over must wear a mask at all times upon leaving home, with exemptions permitted for those who are unable to do so due to health or other specific reasons.

ACT schools will continue with remote learning for the rest of Term 3. All ACT public schools remain open for vulnerable children and children of parents and carers who cannot work from home. Those students can attend their usual public school and access the same remote learning as their peers. Early Childhood Education and Care services, including out of school hours care, also remain open.

ACT Health will continue to monitor the epidemiological situation in the ACT, and the surrounding border region, to inform the Chief Health Officer's advice to Government on lifting of the current lockdown and the gradual easing of restrictions post-lockdown.

Check In CBR and compliance with public health directions

The use of the Check In CBR app remains vital when people leave their home to access essential services and continues to provide contact tracers with the ability to quickly identify exposure locations when new locally acquired cases are reported. As of 7 September 2021, 21,030 venues had registered with Check In CBR, over 48.6 million check ins had been recorded through the app, and the app had been downloaded 954,135 times.

The Health Protection Service, Access Canberra and ACT Policing are continuing to undertake compliance and enforcement activity across the ACT to help protect the community during the current local outbreak. Since the commencement of the lockdown, compliance activity has been focused on ensuring businesses and the community are complying with the various public health restrictions in place.

As of 6 September 2021, ACT Policing has issued 72 cautions, 37 infringements and 24 arrests for alleged breaches of COVID-19 Public Health Directions. A total of 14,300 traffic compliance stops have been undertaken, as well as 3,017 personal compliance checks and 816 business compliance checks. To date, 187 directions to leave the ACT have been issued. ACT Policing will continue to conduct COVID-19 compliance activities including the checking of individuals subject to current directions such as mandatory quarantine.

Access Canberra and the Health Protection Service have undertaken a total of 19,056 proactive inspections and engagements across businesses and industry impacted by public health directions and COVID-19 restrictions as of 31 August 2021. During the period 12 August 2021 to 31 August 2021, a total of 8,227 inspections were recorded which related to the activity of businesses permitted to operate and those required to be closed under the

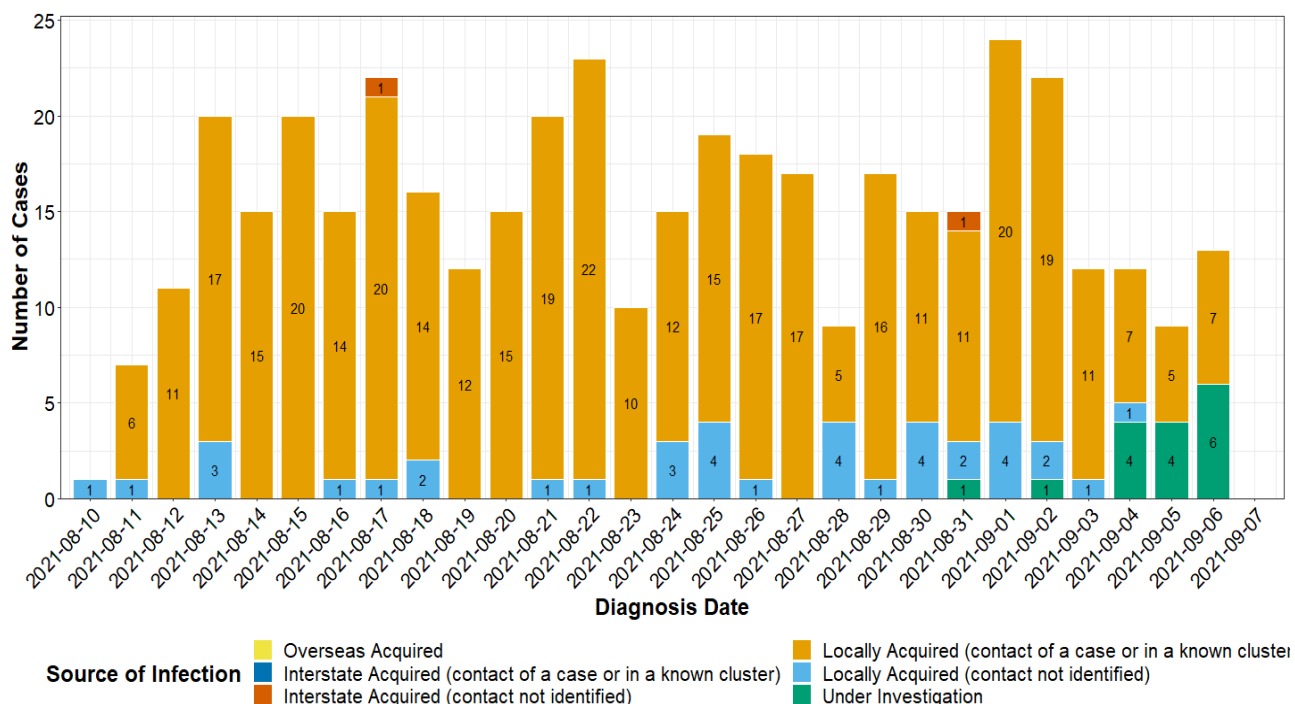
Lockdown Direction. Compliance activity in the last month also included continued engagement with businesses about the use of the Check In CBR app and education around requirements under the Public Health Directions.

Access Canberra and the Health Protection Service did not undertake any major compliance actions during this reporting period, however non-compliance was identified across a few key areas including:

- businesses not enforcing the requirement for delivery drivers to use the Check In CBR app or adhering to physical distancing rules;
- non-essential businesses continuing to trade in breach of the Lockdown Direction;
- staff not adhering to the mandatory use of face masks while in the workplace; and
- click and collect services being offered by businesses that were non-essential and not permitted to do so until the refinements to the Lockdown Direction were introduced.

Compliance with Public Health Directions across the ACT remains stable during this time however these agencies will continue to undertake compliance activity and enforcement to protect our community as the lockdown continues and while the public health emergency due to COVID-19 remains in place in the ACT.

Figure 1: Cases by diagnosis date with source of infection in the ACT COVID-19 outbreak 2021 (10 August 2021 to 8 September 2021)



ACT COVID-19 Vaccination Program

Vaccination coverage

The ACT's COVID-19 Vaccination Program is progressing well. ACT Health's priority is to ensure that the rollout progresses in an efficient, accessible, and above all, safe manner. As of 7 September 2021, 72.4% of the ACT's population (16+), have received their first COVID-19 vaccination dose, and almost half (48.6%) are fully vaccinated. Modelling suggests that the ACT will achieve 50% full vaccination of all individuals aged 16-years and older on Thursday, 9 September. Increased vaccine supply means that the ACT is on track to fully vaccinate all individuals aged 12-years and over by December 2021. The ACT is aiming for over 90% vaccination coverage (of Canberra's aged 16 and over)

Recent ACT transmission of COVID-19 has demonstrated that (public health measures notwithstanding), virus transmission remains persistent among unvaccinated cohorts. These cohorts are strongly represented by members of the CALD community, and as those living in high-density, shared or insecure accommodation; as well as children who are not yet eligible for vaccination. While our public vaccination clinics are operating at a throughput of approximately 25,000 doses weekly, we are also focussed on scaling up targeted in-reach programs that are essential to reduce the risk of ongoing virus transmission among marginalised communities or population groups who are less likely to engage in traditional health services.

Vaccine administration

Approximately 87 general practices and respiratory clinics are onboarded as Commonwealth COVID-19 Vaccinating Sites administering Pfizer and/or AstraZeneca vaccines to eligible Canberrans. Over time, the Commonwealth Government will approve more general practices as Commonwealth Vaccinating Sites (noting that 142 general practitioners currently vaccinate in some form across the ACT).

The ACT Government has four mass vaccination clinics in operation. The Calvary Public Hospital COVID-19 vaccination clinic is administering the AstraZeneca vaccine, and the clinic at the Canberra Airport is increasing the delivery of Pfizer doses to the Canberra community. The Australian Institute of Sport (AIS) mass vaccination clinic was introduced on 2 September 2021 and will be able to provide more Canberrans with vaccinations. The Garran Surge Centre is no longer operating as a mass vaccination hub and is instead transforming into a testing facility. From 13 September 2021, the Weston Creek Community Health Centre will operate as an Access and Sensory vaccination clinic.

Priority groups

The ACT Government COVID-19 vaccination clinics are administering vaccinations to identified priority groups in line with the national rollout strategy. Year 12 students and their exam facilitators can access one of 5,500 priority Pfizer vaccination appointments, to be made available from 6 to 17 September so that Year 12 students can be vaccinated before they attend their formative exams in Term 4. All educators, teachers and staff that work directly with children and young people at ACT schools and childcare centres will also be given priority access to vaccinations. This staffing cohort joins aged care, healthcare and

disability support workers in the group of vocations that are being prioritised for vaccination appointments at government-run clinics.

The Commonwealth-led program for vaccinations in Residential Aged Care Facilities is being closely monitored by ACT Health. The ACT Government encourages aged care workers to come forward for COVID-19 vaccination. Since early June, ACT Health has offered all consenting unvaccinated aged care staff can be contacted directly for a priority booking for Pfizer as part of an expedited booking process. As at 2 September 2021, 87.5 percent of staff in the ACT had received their first dose, and 54.3 percent are fully vaccinated. ACT Health is continuing to work with the Commonwealth, Public Health Network and aged care sector to assist staff to receive vaccinations through fast-tracked appointments at ACT Government clinics and primary care.

Children, young adults and pregnant women

On Wednesday 1 September, eligibility for vaccination in the ACT Government clinics was opened for people aged 16 to 29 years. On this single day, over 14,000 bookings were made. Many of this cohort (over 30,000) had registered their interest in anticipation of the expanded eligibility and were able to streamline their booking.

The Therapeutic Goods Administration (TGA) has provisionally approved the use of Pfizer and Moderna COVID-19 vaccines to include children and young people aged from 12 years. Moderna vaccines have not arrived in Australia and upon arrival will be distributed to primary healthcare providers that have subscribed to the COVID-19 Vaccination Program. The ACT Government are unlikely to be involved in this process.

The Australian Government has also accepted the Australian Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation (ATAGI) recommendation to expand program eligibility to children and young people with underlying medical conditions, disability, or who are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. Consistent with this advice, the ACT has opened vaccination appointments up to the identified 12 to 15 year old cohorts. The Prime Minister has indicated that the broader 12 to 15 year old cohort will become eligible for COVID-19 vaccination from 13 September. The ACT is planning for this eventuality but note that several issues regarding vaccine administration including consent and method of delivery are still being worked through by the Health and Education Directorates. Government is being briefed in relation to these matters.

Under the national rollout, pregnant women are eligible to book a Pfizer COVID-19 vaccine appointment. However, it is recommended that pregnant women continue to discuss their vaccination with their health professional prior to making a booking.

Surveillance and monitoring

Testing numbers in the ACT have increased significantly in the last month due to the ACT outbreak with a total of 407,445 negative tests conducted as at 9:00am on 8 September 2021.

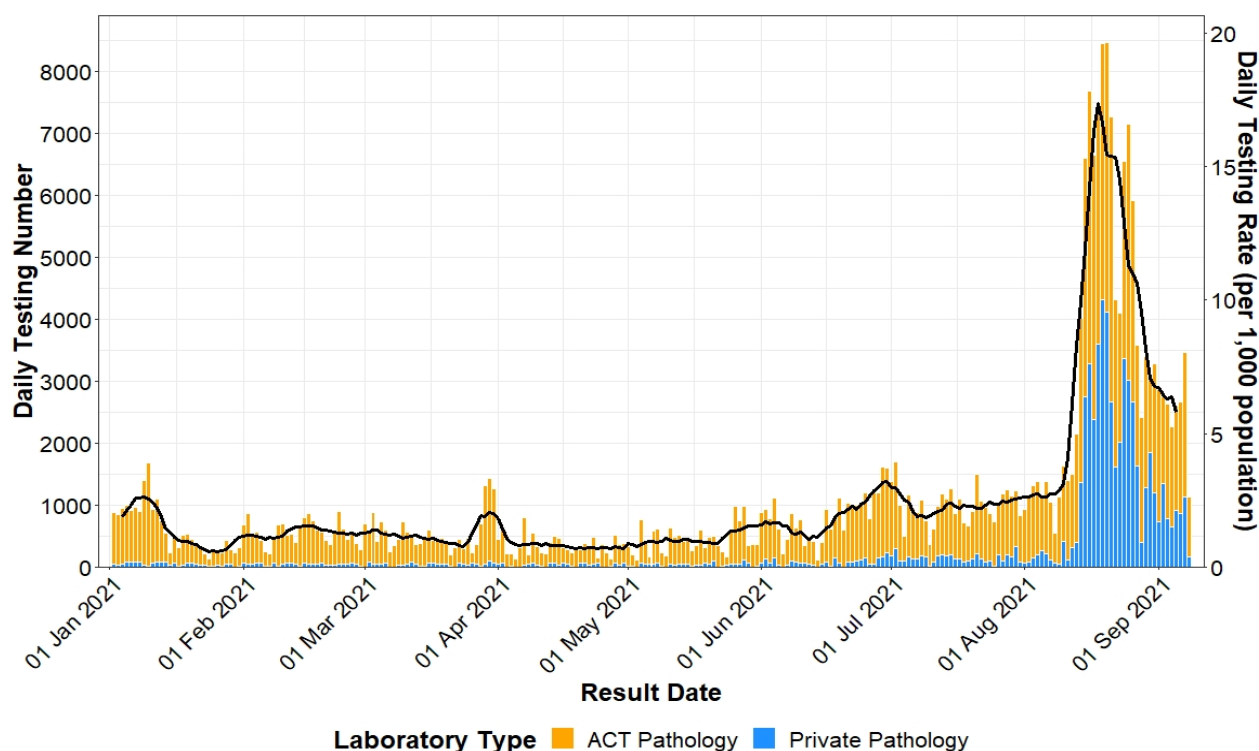
During the current outbreak, testing numbers have ranged from 1,504 (3.5 tests per 1000 population) to 8,478 (19.7 per 1000 population) per day, with a mean of 4,565 (10.6 per 1000 population) per day. Testing numbers reflect the timing of the announcement of

exposure locations in the ACT and then the exit testing requirements associated with having attended these locations, as well as the number of people affected. Peaks in testing numbers were experienced in relation to the numbers of people in quarantine in association with school clusters including Lyneham High School, Gold Creek School and Harrison School. Testing numbers have decreased over the past week as there have been fewer close contact exposure locations and fewer ACT residents are under health directions to test and/or quarantine.

Additional testing sites were established across the ACT to meet the demand for testing at the start of the outbreak including additional drive-through testing sites at Kambah and Brindabella Park, 'pop-up' sites at Gold Creek School and Erindale Active Leisure Centre and in-reach testing to individuals impacted by specific clusters of cases. The ACT's existing testing sites at Exhibition Park in Canberra and Weston Creek Walk-in Centre have continued to provide testing for the community with operational improvements made at these locations to improve efficiency and waiting times. Testing services at Weston Creek Walk-in Centre are being transferred to the Garran COVID-19 Surge Centre as of 9 September 2021 to allow for the Access and Sensory COVID-19 Vaccination Clinic to operate at the Weston Creek site on a more permanent basis. Commonwealth funded GP-led Respiratory Clinics, the Winnunga Nimmityjah Respiratory Clinic and private pathology providers also provide COVID-19 testing in the ACT.

ACT Health is urging all Canberrans to get tested for COVID-19 if they are experiencing any COVID-19 symptoms, no matter how mild, and if they have been at a listed exposure location to ensure any unknown positive cases in the community are quickly identified. Strong testing rates of approximately 3,000 tests per day are required for the ACT to maintain a sound level of surveillance across the community.

Figure 2: Negative testing by result date and laboratory type from 1 January 2021 to 8 September 2021



Conclusion

The current ACT outbreak continues to evolve as new positive cases of COVID-19 are recorded and the total number of exposure locations increases. ACT Health is focusing on strongly suppressing the virus through early detection of new cases; preparedness to thoroughly investigate cases, clusters and outbreaks and ensure our workforce is equipped to surge when required. ACT Health and Canberra Health Services are aligning the Territory's COVID-19 testing strategy to meet current and anticipated needs. ACT Health is also strongly focused on ensuring positive cases and close and secondary contacts are isolating and quarantining and providing targeted support for vulnerable and at-risk communities.

The significant increase in case numbers in Australia, particularly within NSW, over the last month, largely driven by the spread of the highly contagious Delta variant, has presented challenges for Commonwealth, and state and territory health authorities in reducing the potential of cases seeding into their respective jurisdictions. Continued strong public health restrictions are required across the country to enable local outbreaks to be contained and to achieve an adequate level of suppression.

The ACT, along with all jurisdictions, continues to focus on strong suppression with the goal of minimising community transmission of the virus, consistent with the current phase of the National Plan to transition Australia's National COVID-19 Response. As agreed by National Cabinet, the transition between phases will be based on Australia reaching key vaccination thresholds. Vaccination coverage in the ACT is progressing well, with the number of vaccination bookings growing as Commonwealth supply of vaccine to the ACT Government increases.

The ACT is currently in phase A of the National Plan and is estimated to reach 70 per cent COVID-19 vaccination coverage by mid-to-end of October 2021. In this phase of the ACT's COVID-19 response, high level public health and social measures must be maintained to control the spread of the disease. Any relaxation of measures must be balanced with effective test, trace, isolate and quarantine (TTIQ) measures and through greater vaccination coverage.

The ACT Government, through the Public Information Coordination Centre, is delivering clear public messaging to the community and engaging with businesses about the importance of continuing to practise COVID safe behaviours and to book an appointment to get vaccinated when eligible.

Recommendation

As Chief Health Officer, I advise the Minister for Health that the public health emergency declaration should remain in place due to the significant public health risk which is currently posed by COVID-19.

At this time, it remains necessary to maintain strong public health measures to manage the current local outbreak with the aim of suppressing further community transmission. This recommendation is consistent with that of other Australian jurisdictions which are maintaining emergency status or similar at this time and focusing on strong suppression for the purpose of minimising community transmission.