

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 19 – October 2021**

**Presented by
Rachel Stephen-Smith MLA
Minister for Health
9 November 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 OCTOBER 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 October 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 Kerryn Coleman
Chief Health Officer
13 October 2021

CHIEF HEALTH OFFICER REPORT ON THE STATUS OF THE PUBLIC HEALTH EMERGENCY DUE TO COVID-19 – 8 OCTOBER 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 7 October 2021, there have been 236,132,082 confirmed cases of COVID-19, and sadly 4,822,472 deaths reported to the World Health Organization (WHO)¹.

The weekly number of new cases across the world has declined over the past month with over 3.1 million cases reported in the last week, a decrease of nine per cent on the previous week. The United States of America (USA), the United Kingdom, Turkey, the Russian Federation and India reported the highest number of new cases. The total number of deaths reported in the past week across the world has declined in most regions, except for The Americas and Europe which reported a similar number of deaths to the previous week.

National situational update²

As at 9:00am on 8 October 2021, there have been a total of 120,043 cases of COVID-19 reported in Australia and 1,389 deaths. Nationally, there were 8,155 new locally acquired cases reported in the past seven days, with an additional 35 overseas acquired cases. The vast majority of locally acquired cases in the past 30 days were associated with the Greater Sydney and Victorian outbreaks. Across Australia, there is currently an estimated 23,401 active cases and 1,520 cases currently hospitalised.

Over the past month, a small number of COVID-19 cases have been recorded in Queensland, South Australia and Western Australia, and the ongoing outbreaks in New South Wales (NSW) and Victoria have continued. Lockdowns have continued in NSW and Victoria, and Queensland introduced stage two public health restrictions in Brisbane, Gold Coast, Logan,

¹ <https://www.who.int/emergencies/diseases/novel-coronavirus-2019/situation-reports> Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) Weekly Epidemiological Update published 5 October 2021, accessed 8 October 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 October 2021, Australian Government Department of Health, accessed 8 October 2021

Moreton Bay, Townsville and Palm Island from 4:00pm on 30 September 2021 for a period of two weeks.

NSW situation

In NSW, the COVID-19 situation is continuing to evolve in Greater Sydney and regional NSW. Daily case numbers have decreased below 1,000 and as at 8:00pm on 7 October 2021, there are 7,589 active cases across NSW.

The NSW Government's stay-at-home orders remain in place for Greater Sydney and several regional Local Government Areas have been placed under similar stay-at-home orders due to the identification of positive cases in these areas.

On 7 October 2021, the NSW Premier announced that stay-at-home orders would be lifted across the state on 11 October 2021 as NSW has reached the 70 per cent fully vaccinated target for people aged 16 years and over.

At this time, the ACT's COVID-19 Affected Area declaration for all of NSW is still in effect with travel restrictions in place for all travellers from the state. This includes a requirement for all travellers (including ACT residents) to obtain an approved exemption prior to entry.

The ACT's standing exemption permitting NSW residents living in the region surrounding the ACT to enter the ACT remains in place. NSW residents who live in the following approved postcodes are permitted to enter the ACT without an exemption for any reason that is permitted under the ACT's Lockdown direction: 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 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 37,014 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 October 2021. Of these applications, 17,178 have been approved, 10,186 have been declined, 7,833 have been withdrawn or were not required under the Public Health Direction and 1,817 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 and the risk of incursion due to the wide spread of cases across the state.

Victoria situation

In Victoria, the COVID-19 situation has continued to evolve with daily cases peaking at 1,838 cases in the 24 hours to midnight on 8 October 2021. As at 8 October 2021, there are 16,823 active cases across Victoria.

The lockdown restrictions for Greater Melbourne were extended to the entire state of Victoria on 22 August 2021. Lockdown restrictions have since been lifted for several regional areas and as of 8 October 2021, Greater Melbourne, Mitchell Shire, City of Greater Shepparton and Moorabool Shire remain in lockdown. The ACT continues to declare the

entire state of Victoria as a COVID-19 Affected Area requiring all travellers from Victoria (including ACT residents) to seek an exemption before entering the ACT.

Between 22 August 2021 and 9:00am on 8 October 2021, ACT Health has received 1,642 exemption applications to enter the ACT. 882 applications have been approved, 356 applications have been declined, 191 applications are awaiting processing or require further information, and 213 were withdrawn or were not required under the Public Health Direction.

ACT situational update

Current outbreak and lockdown restrictions

The ACT continues to be under lockdown restrictions due to the local outbreak which commenced on 12 August 2021.

A number of clusters have since been identified with transmission linked to several education facilities, early learning centres, residential aged care facilities, hospitality venues, construction sites, public housing sites, and essential retail businesses.

As of 8:00pm on 7 October 2021, there have been a total of 1,147 cases linked to the current ACT outbreak and sadly, six people have died since 12 August 2021. There are currently 430 active cases; 16 of which are in hospital with six cases in intensive care and 5 requiring ventilation. A total of 711 cases associated with the current outbreak have recovered. Of the ACT's 1,271 cases since the start of the pandemic, 832 cases have recovered, and nine deaths have been recorded.

The majority of cases in the current ACT outbreak have been locally acquired and linked to a known case or cluster (84 per cent; 960/1,147). A small proportion of cases remain unlinked (9 per cent; 38/1,147). To date, 23 cases (2 per cent; 23/1,147) have been identified as having been acquired interstate – 13 of these from a known source and 10 from an unknown source. Several cases from recent days remain under investigation but will be classified as linked or unlinked as interviews are undertaken.

As at 8 October 2021, the total number of vaccine doses administered by the ACT Government is 342,233.

As of 9:00am on 8 October 2021, there are 3,631 people in quarantine in the ACT being supported by ACT Health. 1,686 of these individuals are identified close contacts of locally acquired cases and 1,815 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 two dedicated quarantine and isolation facilities – the Australian National University 'Lazaretto' facility and the recently established 'Ragusa' Quarantine Facility in O'Connor. These facilities provide accommodation for positive cases and case contacts who are unable to safely isolate or quarantine at home with a range of clinical, social, community and cultural supports readily available.

To date, the ACT's outbreak response has provided support across a range of high-risk settings including public housing complexes, residential aged care facilities, correctional

facilities and acute health care settings due to the identification of positive cases linked to these settings.

As of 12 noon on 8 October 2021, there are 385 active exposure locations across the ACT and a total of 1,998 exposure locations have been identified since the start of the outbreak on 12 August 2021.

ACT's COVID-19 Pathway Forward

The current *Public Health (Lockdown Restrictions) Emergency Direction 2021 (No 10)* (the Lockdown Direction) is due to conclude at 11:59pm on 14 October 2021 provided the COVID-19 outbreak remains stable.

The ACT's COVID-19 Pathway Forward was released by the Chief Minister on 27 September 2021 and outlines a gradual easing of restrictions for gatherings, businesses and the wider community as the ACT moves out of lockdown.

As outlined in the Pathway Forward, the following refinements to lockdown restrictions were introduced from 1 October 2021:

- Two people permitted to visit another household at any time for any reasons.
- One household (any size) or up to five people can gather outdoors for up to four hours (increased from two hours) for exercise or non-organised recreation.
- Outdoor bootcamps and personal training can recommence with no more than two people, excluding the instructor.
- Coaching is permitted outdoors, with no more than two participants, excluding the coach. Coaching should be undertaken in a contactless way, with social distancing between participants at all times.
- All non-essential retail and small businesses (including motor vehicle dealers) can operate through contactless means, click and collect, or click and deliver services, with no more than five staff permitted to be on the premises, or one person per four square meters (whichever is lesser).
- Nature reserves and National parks have reopened for recreational purposes and in line with outdoor gathering restrictions.
- All dental services, including preventative services, can be undertaken

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 be re-opened gradually as part of the Pathway Forward to ensure learning can be delivered safely and with the lowest possible risk of virus transmission within schools. From 5 October 2021, year 12 students were allowed to return to on campus learning where necessary with year 11 students permitted to attend essential assessments that cannot wait until the planned return for this year cohort on 18 October 2021.

All ACT public schools continue to remain open at this time 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 COVID-19 situation in the ACT as restrictions are gradually eased over the coming months.

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 October 2021, 26,037 venues had registered with Check In CBR, over 60.45 million check ins had been recorded through the app, and 9,271 individual Check In CBR cards for people without access to a smart device had been requested.

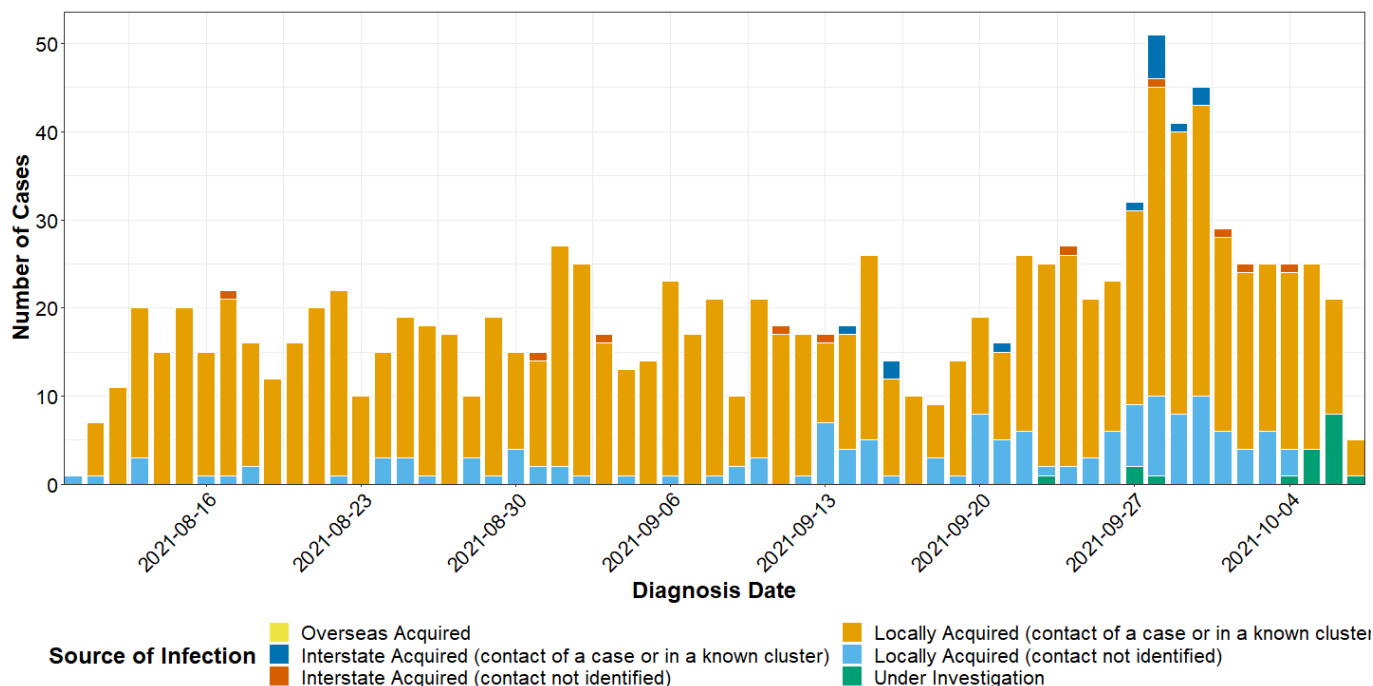
The Health Protection Service, Access Canberra and ACT Policing are continuing to undertake compliance and enforcement activity across the ACT to help protect the community during the current local outbreak. Since the commencement of the lockdown, compliance activity has been focused on ensuring businesses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

As of 5 October 2021, ACT Policing has issued 118 cautions, 66 infringements and made 53 arrests for alleged breaches of COVID-19 Public Health Directions. A total of 41,028 traffic compliance stops have been undertaken, as well as 4,943 personal compliance checks and 1,800 business compliance checks. To date, 483 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.

As at 12 noon on 5 October 2021, Access Canberra and the Health Protection Service have undertaken a total of 20,282 proactive inspections and engagements across businesses and industry impacted by public health directions and COVID-19 restrictions. During the period 12 August 2021 to 12 noon on 5 October 2021, a total of 9,457 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, use of face masks, COVID Safety Plans, click and collect services and other requirements under the Public Health Directions.

Compliance with Public Health Directions across the ACT has remained stable over the past month. Compliance agencies have adopted an integrated approach to compliance activities to support the transition out of Lockdown. They will continue to undertake compliance activity and enforcement to protect our community as restrictions gradually ease 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 October 2021)



ACT COVID-19 Vaccination Program

Vaccination coverage

The ACT’s COVID-19 Vaccination Program is leading the nation and is continuing to achieve strong vaccination coverage across the community. As of 7 October 2021, 97.4 per cent of the ACT’s population aged 16 years and over have received their first COVID-19 vaccination dose, and 71.8 per cent are fully vaccinated. 96.7 per cent of the ACT’s population aged 12 years and over have received their first dose, and 68.3 per cent are fully vaccinated. Increased vaccine supply means that the ACT is on track to fully vaccinate all individuals aged 12 years and over before December 2021. The ACT is aiming for at least 95 per cent vaccination coverage of Canberrans aged 12 years and over.

Recent ACT transmission of COVID-19 has demonstrated that (public health measures notwithstanding), virus transmission remains persistent among unvaccinated cohorts. While our public vaccination clinics have the capacity to operate at a throughput of approximately 25,000 doses weekly, demand for vaccines at these clinics has begun to decline. This has coincided with high levels of vaccine uptake (in excess of 90 per cent) and the growing availability of mRNA vaccines at primary healthcare providers with the arrival of the Moderna vaccine in pharmacies since September 2021. Demand for vaccines through

ACT Government run clinics has declined from 61,240 bookings in Week 28 of the Program, to 36,607 bookings in Week 32.

Our continued focus is 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, as part of the Equity to Access Program.

Vaccine administration

Approximately 87 general practices and respiratory clinics and 64 community pharmacies are onboarded as Commonwealth COVID-19 Vaccinating Sites administering Pfizer, Moderna and/or AstraZeneca vaccines to eligible Canberrans. Over time, the Commonwealth Government will approve more general practices as Commonwealth Vaccinating Sites.

The ACT Government has four mass vaccination clinics in operation. The Canberra Airport and Australian Institute of Sport clinics are administering Pfizer vaccines, and the Access and Sensory vaccination clinic at the Weston Creek Community Health Centre provides Pfizer vaccines to people with sensory or accessibility challenges. The Calvary Public Hospital COVID-19 vaccination clinic is administering the AstraZeneca vaccine, however this clinic will be closed after 8 October 2021 due to the increase in supply of Pfizer and Moderna vaccines which are now available to people aged 60 years and over.

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 were able to access priority Pfizer vaccination appointments throughout September and October so that they could 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 were also 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 has been closely monitored by ACT Health. As at 6 October 2021, 100 percent of staff in the ACT had received their first dose, and 91.5 percent are fully vaccinated. The ACT is the first jurisdiction to meet full vaccination of this employment cohort.

Equity to Access program

The Equity to Access Program delivers COVID-19 vaccinations to vulnerable and marginalised community members through in-reach, pop-up, mobile and in-home settings. Aspen Medical and Canberra Health Services have paired with ACT Health to deliver these clinics.

As at 6 October 2021, Aspen Medical have delivered 1,127 vaccine doses to marginalised and hard-to-reach community members since 11 September; of which 75% were first dose and 25% were second dose vaccinations. Vaccinations were targeted to people from culturally

and linguistically diverse backgrounds, people living with disability (and their family and carers), LGBTIQ+ community members, and people living in insecure accommodation.

CHS clinics have targeted regions with lower levels of vaccination uptake. The clinics have operated in Amaroo and Kambah since 27 September and have delivered vaccines to a total of 514 community members to date.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community

A key area of focus for the ACT's vaccination program is the uptake of COVID-19 vaccines across the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. As at 6 October, 79.0 per cent of eligible Canberrans that identify as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander had received their first vaccination dose and 55 per cent were fully vaccinated. This is 2 percentage points behind the wider population of eligible Canberrans. These figures reflect a change to the way that vaccination coverage is calculated for this sub-cohort as the ACT now use population figures sourced from the Australian Immunisation Register (AIR) in alignment with a decision of the Commonwealth Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Advisory Group.

ACT Health continues to partner with Winnunga Nimmityjah Aboriginal Health and Community Services in the rollout of the ACT's COVID-19 Vaccination Program and provides funding for three nurses to support vaccination administration. ACT Health is also running two dedicated drop-in clinics on the south and northsides of the ACT throughout the month of October 2021 for members of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community.

Mandatory vaccination of workers in health care settings

On 1 October 2021, the AHPPC issued a statement recommending mandatory vaccination for all workers in health care settings as a condition of work.

It is expected that as the ACT and other jurisdictions move out of lockdown and gradually ease restrictions, there will be an increase in the number of COVID-19 cases in the community which may lead to an increase in cases presenting to hospital and admissions to intensive care units.

Health care settings have a high likelihood of providing care for people with COVID-19, resulting in higher rates of potential exposure to staff and patients. Although to date ACT hospitals have demonstrated effective infection prevention and control measures, the impact of COVID-19 outbreaks in health care settings in other jurisdictions is well known. High vaccination coverage for workers in health care settings will provide staff, patients and the wider community with stronger protection from the risk of virus transmission in s

The ACT will seek to implement a vaccination requirement for workers in health care settings in a staged approach in line with the recommendation of AHPPC and agreement of National Cabinet. The first stage will be focused on highest risk settings such as hospitals and ambulance and patient transport services. Consultation is currently underway with the health workforce, unions and key industry stakeholders in the ACT with a view to implement a Public Health Direction by 15 October 2021.

Surveillance and monitoring

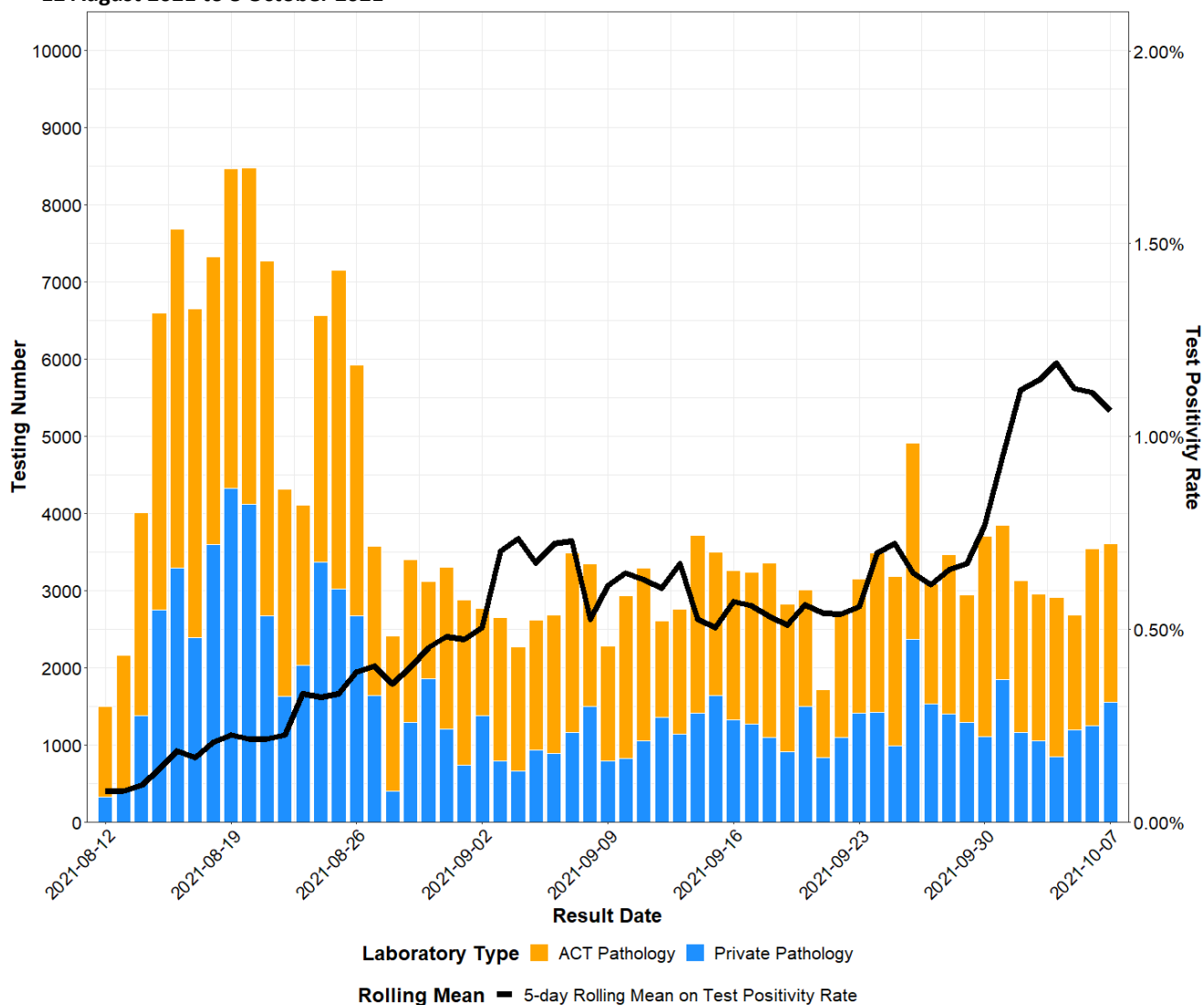
Testing numbers in the ACT have remained strong in the last month due to the ACT outbreak with a total of 503,892 negative tests conducted as at 4:00pm on 8 October 2021.

During the ACT Outbreak, testing numbers have ranged from 1,501 (3.6 tests per 1000 population) to 8,480 (20.3 per 1000 population) per day, with a mean of 3,834 (9.2 per 1000 population) per day. Testing numbers reflect the timing of the announcement of exposure events in the ACT and then the exit testing requirements associated with having attended these events, as well as the number of people affected (for example, peaks in testing numbers were experienced in relation to the numbers of people in quarantine in association with events at Lyneham and Harrison schools). Testing numbers remained steady at around 3000 tests per day across September, with peaks in numbers tested often related to exposure events at supermarkets, where large numbers of people were classified as casual contacts. The five-day rolling mean for test positivity stayed under 0.5 per cent until the end of August and fluctuated between 0.5 and 0.8 per cent throughout September 2021. Since 2 October 2021, this mean has stayed above 1.0 per cent but seems to be trending downwards. In general, test positivity for recent days may be over-inflated given the time delay in receiving data on the number of tests performed.

There are several testing facilities located across the ACT including Canberra Health Services facilities, GP led respiratory clinics and private pathology providers. The Exhibition Park in Canberra Drive Through, Garran COVID-19 Surge Centre, Kambah Drive Through and Gold Creek School pop-up facility provide testing seven days a week and have had their operating hours extended to meet the demand for testing due to the current outbreak.

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 in the ACT COVID-19 outbreak 2021, from 12 August 2021 to 8 October 2021



Source: ACT Health Data Repository.

Conclusion

The current ACT outbreak remains stable at this time and ACT Health remains focused on suppressing virus transmission through early detection of new cases, effective contact tracing and case investigation, and strong public health responses to clusters and outbreaks, particularly in high-risk settings. ACT Health and Canberra Health Services are working closely with other ACT Government agencies, community service partners and the Commonwealth Government to ensure the ACT’s outbreak response provides the necessary support to the entire community.

As jurisdictions move out of lockdowns and ease public health social measures, health authorities will need to respond effectively to new challenges in testing, tracing, isolating and quarantining cases and their contacts, as well as the potential for an increase in hospital admissions. The ACT will move out of lockdown on 15 October 2021 with a planned gradual easing of restrictions to minimise the risk of case numbers rapidly increasing within the

community. The planned easing of public health social measures from will be balanced with effective test, trace, isolate and quarantine (TTIQ) measures.

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. High vaccination coverage places the ACT in a strong position to move to phase B of the National Plan and progress the ACT's Pathway Forward and transition out of lockdown.

The ACT Government, through the Public Information Coordination Centre, will continue to deliver clear public messaging to the community and engage with businesses as restrictions begin to ease over the next month. To date, compliance with public health restrictions and advice has been stable and continued clear public health messaging will ensure the ACT community is well placed as we transition through the national COVID-19 response

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.