

Inquiry into the electricity outages affecting Far West NSW in October 2024

Hearing – 17/03/2025

NSW Health Responses to Questions on Notice

QUESTION 1 – Page 24

Mrs SALLY QUINNELL: ... What I'd like to explore with you is that, in some of the more remote areas like White Cliffs and Wilcannia, health services were using Starlink to keep in contact with people. However, that only enabled them to call out and not receive calls. Was that the sort of information you were hearing? They could receive calls, but the people making the calls didn't have phone coverage, so they couldn't call in.

SARAH WENHAM: I'll have to take that specific question on notice to find out exactly what happened in those communities.

ANSWER

The Far West Local Health District is not aware of the issues surrounding Starlink, however there were periods of time when telecommunications were down in remote areas like White Cliffs and Wilcannia. In these instances, health staff undertook community check ins/door knocks to identify vulnerable members of the community and share messaging, including information about access to facilities.

The District was informed that the Public Safety Network remained operational. The District was further advised that, to support emergency services, the NSW Telco Authority had deployed multiple mobile radio assets to enhance Public Safety Network coverage in Broken Hill, Menindee, Tibooburra, Wilcannia and White Cliffs.

QUESTION 2 – Page 26-27

The CHAIR: Ms Wenham, for you, you spoke about your more remote medical sites having generators at those sites. Is that true for all of your sites?

SARAH WENHAM: I believe that is the case, but I can confirm that on notice for you.

The CHAIR: Could I ask you just to confirm that, please? I'd also then ask, as an extension of that, do they have access to backup telecommunications – for example, Starlink?

SARAH WENHAM: Again, I will take that on notice to provide you with exactly the generator status and communication status for each of our facilities.

The CHAIR: Finally, probably as an addition to that, if there are generators and they do require diesel, fuelling and things like that, are the staff out there aware of how that works and how often it needs to happen and all of that sort of stuff?

SARAH WENHAM: I believe they are, but I will confirm that all on notice for you.

ANSWER

Each site in the Far West Local Health District has a backup generator. The generators are serviced monthly by District staff, and every 6 months by an external specialist contractor.

All generators are equipped with sufficient fuel stores for the size of the facility and generator. Staff at those sites are aware of how to refuel the generators, and there is a maintenance team spread across the District who assist, train and monitor fuel reserves.

One remote health site has Starlink. The District is exploring options to update all remote health facilities with satellite communication solutions.

QUESTION 3 – Page 27

Ms MARYANNE STUART: Can I ask a follow up question, Chair? Dr Wenham, did Transgrid reach out to NSW Health to say what had happened, or did you find out via ABC News, or —

SARAH WENHAM: Again, may I take that on notice? Whilst I sit on the incident management team, I don't personally sit on the emergency management committee, so I would have to take on notice exactly how the communication happened directly between the LHD and Transgrid.

Ms MARYANNE STUART: I just wanted to see whether, as such a big stakeholder, Transgrid directly came to you to advise what was happening.

SARAH WENHAM: I will take that on notice, and I will find out that information for you.

ANSWER

Communication between Transgrid and the District began once the Local Emergency Management Committee was stood up by NSW Police on 17 October 2024.

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NSW Health Responses to Supplementary Questions

QUESTION 1

What laws and regulations prohibit health practitioners and services from providing information about known patients who need the support of a generator for essential medical reasons to an electricity service provider or other response agency?

QUESTION 1a

What parts of the existing privacy framework would need to be addressed or amended to permit the sharing of health information without needing to first verify patient consent, where that information would ensure critical medical care can be delivered in times of emergencies?

ANSWER

The NSW Health Records and Information Privacy Act would allow health practitioners and health service providers to share information about known patients who need the support of a generator for essential medical reasons to an electricity service provider or other response agency:

- With consent,
- Where the disclosure was directly related to the primary purpose for collecting the patient information (ie patient care) and the individual would reasonably expect the organisation to disclose the information,
- to assist in a stage of emergency, where the disclosure of the information was reasonably necessary to assist in the stage of emergency and it is impracticable or unreasonable to seek consent,
- to less or prevent a serious and imminent risk to the life, health or safety of an individual.

QUESTION 1b

Or should there be a scheme or mechanism whereby a patient can register to have their information shared when they are accessing health services, before an emergency occurs?

ANSWER

There are two schemes in NSW where people who have eligible medical conditions and/or are required to use powered life support equipment may register themselves with Service NSW:

- NSW Medical Energy Rebate – for people who have medical conditions which cause an inability to self-regulate body temperature, and
- NSW Life Support Energy Rebate Scheme – for people who need, or have someone living with them who needs, to use approved powered life support equipment at home, such as oxygen concentrators, ventilators, enteral and parenteral feeding pumps, external heart pumps, home dialysis, phototherapy and powered wheelchairs.

This application form for these schemes include the ability to share their medical information with Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water for emergency purposes.