

**Submission  
No 32**

**THE IMPLEMENTATION OF PORTFOLIO COMMITTEE No. 2  
RECOMMENDATIONS RELATING TO WORKFORCE ISSUES, WORKPLACE  
CULTURE AND FUNDING CONSIDERATIONS FOR REMOTE, RURAL AND  
REGIONAL HEALTH**

**Organisation:** Royal Flying Doctor Service of Australia (South Eastern Section)

**Date Received:** 13 October 2023



## Royal Flying Doctor Service

Submission to the Select Committee on Remote, Rural and Regional Health Inquiry into the implementation of rural health recommendations.

13 October, 2023

## Executive Summary

The Royal Flying Doctor Service South Eastern Section (RFDS) appreciates the opportunity to contribute to the Select Committee's consideration and reporting on the progress of and issues relating to the implementation of Portfolio Committee No 2 recommendations as outlined in the published terms of reference.

The Royal Flying Doctor Service was the first, and remains the largest and most comprehensive, flying medical service in the world. In 2019/20 it generated \$2.5 billion in economic benefits to Australia and supported over 40,000 jobs nation-wide (\$130m and some 700 jobs to NSW). It helped over 330,000 people nationwide (over 1,000 people every day) providing lifesaving, emergency, primary and allied health care services in a culturally sensitive manner.

In 2021/22 in NSW, the RFDS flew over 4.1km across more than 60 rural, regional and remote locations, to provide over 85,000 occasions of care (for critical emergency, primary and allied health care services) to people in rural, regional and remote communities (including over 15 First Nations) who would have limited (if any) access to these services.

This year the RFDS marked its 95<sup>th</sup> year milestone in improving access and supporting better health outcomes to remote, rural and regional communities - providing the finest care to the furthest corner consistent with its values of reliability, trust, care and safety.

The RFDS is a trusted partner of the NSW Health system and the most trusted charity in Australia<sup>1</sup>. Its operations and frontline staff regionally based. It is unique in the scope and breadth of the services it provides (unmatched by any other non-government provider) and uniquely placed to contribute to the Select Committee's considerations.

The RFDS welcomes the Select Committee's examination of whether health services in remote, rural and regional are improving and what is being done to strengthen NSW's regional health workforce and ensure that health services in remote, rural and regional NSW receive appropriate funding.

In this submission, the RFDS comments on these terms of reference and makes four recommendations to the Select Committee. Each of these recommendations are premised on:

- recognition of the integral role played by the RFDS in the provision of emergency, primary health and allied health care services to, and as part of, the NSW Health system,
- the need for a level playing field in term of access to Government policies, programs and incentives; and
- the need for funding to reflect actual costs and provide long term certainty so that organisations like the RFDS can operate and invest in the long term with certainty.

We thank the Select Committee for this important work and invite the Committee to visit any of the RFDS rural bases to gain first-hand information from health workers and communities at the grassroots about their experiences in living, working and accessing health care in remote, rural and regional NSW.

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<sup>1</sup> "Most Reputable Charity" – 11 Times – Charity Reprtrak Survey; Voted By Australians – Winner Trusted Brand 2023 – Readers Digest.

## Summary of Recommendations

### Recommendation 1

The RFDS plays a critical role in NSW in the delivery of emergency and frontline health care services to remote, rural and regional communities, who would otherwise have limited (if any) access to these services. This role and frontline service is unique, recognised and valued by the NSW Government and communities across the breadth of NSW as a vital and complementary and part of the NSW health system.

The implementation of the Inquiry's recommendations should recognise this, facilitate a level playing field, and ensure that the RFDS is included in, and not disadvantaged by, the implementation of Government policies, programs and incentives aimed at addressing workforce shortages and appropriate levels of healthcare funding.

### Recommendation 2

Incentives aimed at recruiting and retaining an essential healthcare workforce in rural and regional NSW are valuable and should not be limited to government organisations and agencies but be applied equally to organisations that provide these services as part of, or complementary, to the NSW health system.

This will ensure there are no unintended consequences or disadvantages posed by these policies and incentives to organisations such as the RFDS.

### Recommendation 3

The RFDS is well placed, through its partnerships with NSW Health and the university sector, to support measures to boost training and accreditation opportunities for rural and remote healthcare workers, in addition to supporting the roll out of the Single Employer Model.

With equal access to any professional, financial and career Government incentives and Government support to establish scholarship-based training programs, the RFDS can provide valuable training, accreditation and career path opportunities for rurally based GPs, nurses and midwives.

### Recommendation 4

Reviews of funding models, programs and incentives should reflect actual costs and apply equally to organisations such as the RFDS, who provide essential and critical emergency, primary and allied services as part of, or complementary to, the NSW Health system.

Greater funding certainty (including through long term contracts of 10 years+) should also be provided so that the RFDS can plan and invest with certainty and continue to provide essential community health services, and support critical emergency, health and allied jobs throughout NSW.

## 1. The Royal Flying Doctor Service

### **Recommendation 1**

The RFDS plays a critical role in NSW in the delivery of emergency and health care services to remote, rural and regional communities, who would otherwise have limited (if any) access to these services. This role and frontline service is unique, recognised and valued by the NSW Government and communities across the breadth of NSW as a vital and complementary and part of the NSW health system.

The implementation of the Inquiry's recommendations should recognise this, facilitate a level playing field, and ensure that the RFDS is included in, and not disadvantaged by, the implementation of Government policies, programs and incentives aimed at addressing workforce shortages and appropriate levels of healthcare funding.

The RFDS was the first, and remains the largest and most comprehensive, flying medical service in the world. This year it marked its 95th year of providing emergency medical and health services to rural, regional and remote communities across Australia, including over 60 locations in NSW and servicing over 15 First Nations.

At Attachment 1 is a map depicting the scope and breadth of RFDS operations across NSW.

In 2019/20 the Royal Flying Doctor Service generated \$2.5 billion in economic benefits to Australia and supported over 40,000 jobs nation-wide (\$130m and some 700 jobs to NSW). It helped over 330,000 people nationwide (over 1,000 people every day) providing lifesaving, emergency, primary and allied health care services in a culturally sensitive manner.

At Attachment 2 is an overview of RFDS operations, its 95-year history, its national and state economic contributions.

In NSW, the RFDS is rurally and regionally based (with key operational bases at Broken Hill and Dubbo). The RFDS employs over 350 caring, dedicated and highly skilled people (including doctors, nurses, midwives, pilots, engineers, dentists, mental health specialists and other specialists) the majority of which are regionally based. The RFDS provides essential frontline health services, improves health outcomes, and contributes broader social, health and economic benefits to remote, rural and regional remote communities – many of which would otherwise have limited (if any) access to essential health care.

The RFDS is very well known for its emergency aeromedical retrieval services. It is also a significant provider of essential health care services to people living in remote, rural, and regional NSW – working with, and as part of, the NSW Health system to deliver a comprehensive set of frontline services and skills in the primary and allied health care fields which are unmatched by any other non-government provider throughout NSW and Australia.

It is a critical and complementary part of the NSW health system and, in our respectful view, should be recognised accordingly.



Last year the RFDS in NSW flew more than 4.1 million kilometres and delivered 85,000 occasions of care. Highlights included the provision of:

- primary care to 7,231 patients, across 838 primary health clinics
- 3,775 dental patient visits across 665 dental clinics in 31 locations
- 3,411 face-to-face mental health services and alcohol and other drugs consultations, across 1,649 clinics in 27 locations
- 4,600 telehealth allied health sessions in 27 locations
- 6,200 inter-hospital transfers of high-acuity patients
- 32,623 COVID vaccinations across 590 COVID vaccination clinics
- 104 COVID-19 respiratory clinics.

The RFDS is a significant employer in regional and rural NSW, directly employing more than 350 people across the state, including in major rural centres such as Broken Hill and Dubbo. More than two thirds are specialised medical and health workers (doctors, nurses, midwives, dentists, mental health and other allied health specialists), pilots, engineers and other aviation experts. The flow-on social, health and economic benefits from this level of commitment and investment are significant.

The RFDS delivers its emergency, primary and allied health care services to remote, rural and regional NSW through multiple channels, directly; aeromedically via fly-in, fly-out (FIFO); drive-in, drive-out (DIDO) clinics; virtually via 'virtual care' or telehealth consultations using IT-based solutions; as well as face-to-face consultations via community-based general medical practices.

In November 2022, in response to critical shortages of GPs servicing rural and remote NSW, the RFDS stepped in to ensure two local community GP medical practices in Gilgandra and Warren in the NSW Western region did not close. The two practices together provide healthcare to more than 8,400 patients.

The RFDS' intervention provided ongoing certainty, stability and continuity of care for the communities who rely on these essential medical services. A fourth clinic, at Condobolin, is soon to join this RFDS family following an approach to the RFDS by the local community.

As an organisation devoted to, and with over 95 years of history in, providing the finest care to the furthest corner, the RFDS has always stepped up and delivered in good times and at times of crisis.

The past four years have been very tough for healthcare operators, with the impacts of COVID, a series of natural disasters, mounting inflationary pressures, global supply chain challenges and critical medical and health workforce shortages.

An essential element to a more sustainable future, requires the recognition of the RFDS as a vital contributor to the NSW Health System, the extension of all policies, programs and incentives to organisations such as the RFDS, and appropriate levels of funding to secure a more certain and stable future.

## 2. Workforce – Recruitment and Retention

### Recommendation 2:

Incentives aimed at recruiting and retaining an essential healthcare workforce in rural and regional NSW are valuable and should be applied equally to organisations that provide these services as part of, or complementary, to the NSW health system.

This will ensure there are no unintended consequences or disadvantages posed by these policies and incentives to organisations such as the RFDS.

The RFDS notes that ‘Strengthen the regional health workforce’ is the first of six strategic priorities highlighted in the [NSW Regional Health Strategic Plan 2022-2032](#).

The RFDS supports the need for a strong, stable and well qualified rural and regional healthcare workforce. The RFDS supports the need to nurture and grow the health and medical workforce across rural and regional NSW and supports the application of government policies and incentives aimed at attracting and retaining a medical and health workforce in NSW regions – with one important caveat. That these valuable incentives be applied equally to all organisations providing these services as part of, or complementary to, the NSW Health system.

This will ensure there are no unintended consequences or disadvantages to RFDS posed by Government policies and incentives aimed at recruiting and retaining an essential healthcare workforce in rural and regional NSW.

This is particularly important to the RFDS given:

1. it is the only non-government provider of such a broad range of holistic emergency and preventive and primary healthcare services throughout NSW and Australia;
2. it plays a critical and complementary role to the NSW health system in the provision of preventive, primary, emergency and allied health services to remote, rural, and regional NSW;
3. the fact that the majority (two-thirds) of the RFDS workforce and operations are rurally and regionally based;
4. the significant level of investment that has been, and continues to be, made by the RFDS to attract, train and retain its highly skilled workforce and other essential medical services, such as GP practices, to serve the needs of rural and regional communities; and
5. the broader investment, social, health and economic benefits generated by the RFDS presence in remote, rural and regional NSW.

In this respect, the RFDS highlights two recent announcements by the NSW Government to boost and incentivise the relocation of healthcare workers to rural and remote areas which should apply equally to the RFDS:

- a doubling of the incentives offered to healthcare workers who move to rural and remote areas, from \$10,000 to \$20,000<sup>2</sup>; and

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<sup>2</sup> 11 August 2023, NSW Government announcement “NSW Government to offer \$20,000 incentive package for critical healthcare vacancies in remote NSW” [https://www.health.nsw.gov.au/news/Pages/20230811\\_01.aspx](https://www.health.nsw.gov.au/news/Pages/20230811_01.aspx)

- study subsidies of \$4000 per year for commencing students, or a one-off sum of \$8,000 for existing students, to help boost the health workforce<sup>3</sup>.

### 3. Accreditation and Training

#### Recommendation 3

The RFDS is well placed, through its partnerships with NSW Health and the university sector, to support measures to boost training and accreditation opportunities for rural and remote healthcare workers, in addition to supporting the roll out of the Single Employer Model.

With equal access to any professional, financial and career Government incentives and Government support to establish scholarship-based training programs, the RFDS could provide valuable training, accreditation and career path opportunities for rurally based GPs, nurses and midwives.

The RFDS welcomes recent innovations in approaches to reducing hurdles facing rural and remote clinicians in training and, as mentioned previously, is keen to participate in the Single Employer Model arrangements being rolled out across NSW.

The RFDS strongly supports the Single Employer Model (as per Portfolio Committee No 2 Recommendation 9) as an important initiative that promises to make rural careers a more attractive and practical option for medical students, doctors in training and GP registrars at key decision points along their career trajectory.

The RFDS is well placed to support measures to boost training and accreditation opportunities for rural and remote healthcare workers – particularly with respect to aiding the implementation of Portfolio Committee No 2 Recommendations 14 and 20.

For example, the RFDS has an MOU with Broken Hill University Department of Rural Health (UDRH) and the Far West Local Health District (FWLHD) to employ Rural Generalists as part of a shared model.

Rural Generalists can be used to flexibly provide primary care, Visiting Medical Officer (VMO) services at the local hospital, telehealth and after-hours calls across several specialty areas including for example maternity care, oncology, indigenous health, anaesthetics and palliative care.

The RFDS also employs Flight Nurses and Registered Nurses (RNs), who are vital to the delivery of essential emergency and health services - they provide clinic care, emergency, inter-hospital and retrieval in-flight care for an area of almost 650,000 square kilometres.

With Government support through, for example, equal access to any professional, financial and career Government incentives, or the establishment of a scholarship-based training program, the RFDS could employ and upskill Registered Nurses (RNs) to work across a range of specialties and manage a range of acute and chronic conditions while in the air.

Investment in this type of activity would enable the RFDS to train, support and employ additional Nurse Practitioners and enable RNs to upskill in midwifery and other specialty areas, establish more

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<sup>3</sup> 12 September 2023, NSW Government announcement, “Health worker study subsidies will bolster recruitment and retention”. [https://www.health.nsw.gov.au/news/Pages/20230912\\_02.aspx](https://www.health.nsw.gov.au/news/Pages/20230912_02.aspx)



nurse practitioners and provide valuable career pathways for nurses to upskill, and aid the recruitment and retention of essential health workforce in rural and regional NSW.

It would also contribute to the implementation and delivery of a stronger nursing and midwifery workforce, building and strengthening established partnerships between organisations such as the RFDS, universities and Local Health Districts to address critical workforce and career path needs.

#### 4. Funding – Review of Programs and Incentives

##### Recommendation 4

Reviews of funding models, programs and incentives should reflect actual costs and appropriate levels of funding should apply equally to organisations such as the RFDS, who provide essential and critical emergency, primary and allied services as part of, or complementary to, the NSW Health system.

Greater funding certainty (including through long term contracts of 10 years+) should also be provided so that the RFDS can plan and invest with certainty and continue to provide essential community health services, support critical emergency, health and allied jobs throughout NSW.

The RFDS strongly supports the principle of regular reviews of funding models, the identification of service delivery gaps, and recommendations for funding increases for the delivery of rural, regional and remote medical and health services (as articulated in Inquiry Recommendations 1 and 4).

The RFDS currently delivers more than 35 distinct services, covering the full spectrum of emergency aeromedical retrieval, inter-hospital transfers, non-emergency patient transport, a variety of FIFO and DIDO primary healthcare, dental and mental health clinics, on-site mental health wellbeing centres, women's health and breast health services, alcohol, and other drugs services, and community-based GP medical centres.

The RFDS has always stepped up and delivered in very tough times, and at times of crisis to ensure essential medical services continue to be available to remote, rural and regional communities, examples of which stepping up during the pandemic and stepping in to provide GP services in Gilgandra, Warren and soon Condoblin.

Regulatory, transport, delivery, maintenance and resourcing costs have been escalating since the pandemic and are compounded by ongoing inflationary pressures, global supply chain challenges and critical workforce shortages. Demand for essential medical and health services in remote and rural locations has also been increasing.

Consistent with the Inquiry's findings, the costs of providing many emergency and other health services which are activity based do not reflect the actual costs of providing that service. For an organisation like the RFDS - that employs many highly trained specialists (doctors, nurses, pilots, engineers), who are mostly based in rural and regional locations, and experiences substantial standby costs - these costs are significant and compounded by the current inflationary environment (including fuel and exchange rate costs).

It is our respectful view that any review of funding models, programs and incentives should reflect actual costs and in light of this, appropriate levels of funding should apply equally to organisations such as the RFDS, who provide essential and critical emergency, primary and allied services as part of, or complementary to, the NSW Health system.

Furthermore, in recognition of:

- the vital role the RFDS plays in the NSW Health System; and
- the need to operate on an equal footing, with equal access to Government incentives and programs aimed at strengthening NSW's regional health workforce;

it is our respectful recommendation that greater funding certainty (including through long term contracts of 10 years+) should be provided so that the RFDS can plan and invest with certainty and continue to provide essential community health services, and support critical emergency, health and allied jobs throughout NSW.

MAP



# Our service reach

- Primary Health Clinic
- Remote Area Nurses on site
- GP Medical Practices
- Dental and Oral Health
- Mental Health and Alcohol and Other Drugs support services
- Wellbeing Places
- We've Got Your Back (WGYB) - Far West Region
- Guiding Rural Outback Wellbeing (GROW)
- Emergency retrieval service - provided to all regions within the state of NSW
- Inter-hospital transfers including Air Ambulance locations
- Non-Emergency Patient Transfers (NEPT)
- Rural Aerial Health Service (RAHS)
- Contracted Aeromedical Service Delivery
- South Eastern Section Bases
- Support office



## Royal Flying Doctor Service

The Royal Flying Doctor Service (RFDS) was the first, and remains the largest and most comprehensive, flying medical service in the world.

### **95 Years of Service & Philanthropy**

In May of this year, the RFDS marked a 95 year history of providing emergency and essential care to remote, rural and vulnerable communities throughout NSW and Australia.

It is an icon of Australian philanthropy, ingenuity and dedication to providing medical excellence/emergency medical services to remote, rural and vulnerable communities. It is committed to playing its role in achieving reconciliation; to developing long term partnerships; and to delivering services in a culturally appropriate way to effect real change in the health access and outcomes of First Nations peoples.

### **\$2.5 billion Benefit & 40,000 Jobs Across Australia**

In 2019/20 it generated \$2.5 billion in economic benefits to Australia and supports over 40,000 jobs nation-wide (\$130m and 686 to the State of NSW respectively).

In 2020/21, with a fleet of 79 aircraft at 23 aerobases, along with some 200 road vehicles the RFDS helped over 330,000 people nationwide – over 1,000 people every day – providing lifesaving, emergency and primary health services, patient transfers, mental, dental, and other vital health care services in a culturally sensitive manner. Examples included:

- aeromedical retrieval and clinic services at some 200 rural and remote sites;
- over 112,000 aeromedical patient retrievals;
- over 72,000 patients transported by road;
- almost 24,000 health care clinics;
- over 24,000 mental health consultations; and
- more than 11,000 episodes of dental care.

The RFDS provides vital medical and health services, improves health outcomes and reduces pressures on our health system. It is a trusted government partner, and the most trusted charity in NSW.

### **Flying 4.1m km to more than 60 Rural and Remote Locations Across NSW**

In 2021/22 the RFDS South Eastern Section flew over 4.1 million kilometres to provide vital health and care services across more than 60 rural, regional and remote locations in NSW to provide critical emergency and primary health care services, including over:

- 85,000 occasions of care;
- 32,000 COVID-19 vaccinations;



- 7,200 primary health patients;
- 6,200 inter-hospital transfers of high acuity patients;
- 3,700 dental patient visits in 31 locations;
- 3,400 face to face consultations and over 4,600 telehealth sessions for mental health, alcohol and other drugs in 27 locations;
- new primary health outreach clinics; and
- new older persons mental health programs.

### **350+ Dedicated People in NSW**

The RFDS in NSW has a workforce of 350+ caring and dedicated people (including doctors, nurses, pilots, engineers, dentists, mental health workers and other specialists), is equipped and ready to respond to those in need 24/7 and has delivered in challenging times, including pandemics and natural disasters.

Our two key regional bases in Broken Hill and Dubbo have operated for 87 years (since 1936 and 2001 respectively).

They employ over 230 people who deliver Emergency Retrievals, Acute Inter-Hospital Transfers (Air Ambulance), the Clive Bishop Medical Centre and Primary Healthcare Clinic, Dental Care, Mental Health, Alcohol, and Other Drugs Counselling Outreach to people living in rural and remote communities across NSW.

### **Sustainability**

Through its dedication to providing the finest care to the furthest corner, in line with our values of reliability, trust, care and safety, the RFDS has delivered in very tough times and absorbed escalating transport, delivery, maintenance and resourcing costs so it can continue to deliver vital medical services to communities in need in remote and rural locations.

The RFDS SE has always stepped up and delivered in good times and at times of crisis. The past four years, have, however, been particularly tough, and the impacts of COVID 19, a series of natural disasters, and continuing inflationary pressures are taking their toll.

What the RFDS needs is:

- recognition of the vital role it plays in the NSW Health System;
- to operate in an equal playing field, with equal access to Government incentives and programs aimed at strengthening NSW's regional health workforce;
- funding models, programs and incentives that reflect actual costs and apply equally to organisations such as the RFDS;
- funding certainty (including through long term contracts of 10 years+);

so that Australia's iconic and most respected flying medical service, can continue to provide essential community health services, support critical emergency, health and allied jobs and confidently mark its 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 5 year's time.

## Select Committee Terms of Reference

That the Select Committee on Remote, Rural and Regional Health inquire into and report on the progress of and issues relating to the implementation of Portfolio Committee No. 2 recommendations relating to workforce issues, workplace culture and funding for remote, rural and regional health services and programs, including:

- a) any challenges or opportunities relating to the implementation of recommendations relating to workforce issues, workplace culture and funding for remote, rural and regional health services and programs
- b) staffing numbers, recruitment and retention, and related workforce management and planning issues (including Recommendations 8, 9, 11, 12, 15, 16, 17, 18, 30 and 33)
- c) staff accreditation and training (including Recommendations 13, 14, 19, 20, 23, and 29)
- d) workplace culture, including forthcoming reviews of workplace culture and complaint handling mechanisms (including Recommendations 40 and 41)
- e) funding for agencies, programs and incentives (including Recommendations 1, 4, 10, 23, 24, 30 and 38), and any funding issues relating to the above recommendations.