

# NSW Government's management of the COVID-19 pandemic

## Hearing – 13/09/2021

### QUESTION 1 – Page 23

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Obviously Committee members asked some questions previously and we have now received information from NSW Health in relation to the outbreak. Are you able to tell us what advice was provided to government, particularly after 24 June when it became clear that more people had attended the party in West Hoxton prior to the broader lockdown of Greater Sydney?

**Ms PEARCE:** Not the specifics, no, I am sorry. I do not have that information before me today. Yes, I am a member of that committee; however, I do not have the specifics. I would have to take it on notice, although I do note that responses have previously been provided to this Committee in prior questions on notice. I have nothing further to add at this point.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Perhaps if you could take on notice the issues in relation to, again, we ask the question: What advice was provided to the Government, given that it was clear that it had not been contained in the east on 24 June and it was not until 26 June that Greater Sydney went into lockdown?

**Ms PEARCE:** Thank you. I will take it on notice.

### ANSWER

In the week of 21 June 2021, NSW Health contacted known COVID-19 cases and their close and casual contacts, and immediately instructed them to isolate, get tested, and monitor for symptoms as appropriate, including people that had attended the party in West Hoxton.

NSW Health provided advice to the NSW Government on the locations in Greater Sydney where there was a growing number of COVID-19 cases, factors that may increase the risk of COVID-19 transmission in local communities, and measures that could mitigate transmission risks.

### QUESTION 2 – Page 23-24

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Are you able to tell us why the 5,000-strong Aboriginal medical health workforce has not been included in the public health orders in relation to a mandating of vaccines?

**Ms PEARCE:** I would have to take that on notice, I am afraid.

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** That would be very good. There is clearly a problem here. All other health workers are supposed to have been vaccinated. I presume that means they have obviously gone to the top of the queue in terms of access to vaccine and yet the Aboriginal health workers across this State have not been included in the public health orders. Would you also be able to tell us whether there is a plan to change that?

**Ms PEARCE:** On notice, thank you.

### ANSWER

Healthcare workers, including Aboriginal Health workers, were included as priority groups for vaccinations as part of the national Phase 1b COVID-19 vaccine rollout.

At this stage, Public Health Orders that mandate COVID-19 vaccinations for certain workers do not apply to primary health care staff who are not contracted or employed by NSW Health. However the Orders are continually under review and amended as appropriate.

### QUESTION 3 – Page 29

**The CHAIR:** Ms Pearce, given the housing crisis in Wilcannia, the provision of the motorhomes needs to be indefinite. That is the call we got from Wilcannia in the session earlier today. Will you give that commitment now that they will remain there indefinitely until the housing crisis is addressed in Wilcannia?

**Ms PEARCE:** I will take that on notice, Mr Shoebridge. But, as I have said, the need for the motorhomes for however long they are required in terms managing the COVID situation, I can absolutely guarantee. As to what happens after that, I will take that on notice.

### ANSWER

NSW Health is working in collaboration with the Australian Government to implement an effective public health response to COVID-19 in Wilcannia. The Far West Local Health District is working in collaboration at a local level with Maari Ma Aboriginal Health Corporation, the Royal Flying Doctor Service, Aboriginal Working Party and other services including Compass Housing, Aboriginal Affairs, the Primary Health Network, Western NSW Local Health District, the Department of Education, the Central Darling Shire Council and the local police.

On 6 September 2021, NSW Health deployed 30 motorhomes to the Council-owned campervan site in Wilcannia to further assist the close contacts of people with COVID-19 to isolate safely and effectively if they could not do so at home. The motorhomes will continue to be available for as long as they are required to manage the COVID-19 situation in Wilcannia.

### QUESTION 4 – Page 29

**The CHAIR:** The Premier has said that she responded within hours of the request from NSW Health for a lockdown. Is that your understanding of the circumstances? And when did NSW Health advise the Premier that there should be a lockdown of Greater Sydney?

**Ms PEARCE:** Again, Mr Shoebridge, I am not able to respond to that categorically. I do not have that information before me. My role, to be clear, is to operationalise decisions that are made. I am not the chief health officer and I am not responsible for making those recommendations. Consequently, I do not have the specific detail on that before me today.

**The CHAIR:** Will you take it on notice, Ms Pearce?

**Ms PEARCE:** I have already taken it on notice, Mr Shoebridge.

**The CHAIR:** Could you take on notice when either the health Minister and/or the Premier were first advised about the concerns arising from the West Hoxton superspreader party event?

**Ms PEARCE:** Again, it is not for me to speak for others. I believe the questions have previously been put and a question on notice responded to. But we will take on notice the issues that are being raised today. I cannot respond any further to them.

**The CHAIR:** Including that question, Ms Pearce?

**Ms PEARCE:** That is right.

### ANSWER

See response to question 1.

### QUESTION 5 – Page 33

**The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS:** And, obviously, I do not want to give away specific circumstances that have been raised with me, but these are the concerns that have been raised. Are you having any issues with the access of those specialists from South Australia coming into Broken Hill to provide those services at the moment?

**Ms PEARCE:** I would have to take that on notice in terms of the specifics.

### ANSWER

Far West Local Health District has 17 specialists affected by the border restriction imposed on them by South Australia. Of these, five are crucial to the function of the respective units they cover (Emergency Department, Anaesthetics, Paediatrics and General Medicine). All 17 specialists and senior doctors working at Broken Hill Hospital are required to isolate at home for 14 days on their return to South Australia.

#### QUESTION 6 – Page 38

**The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS:** We did hear this morning from the Aboriginal medical services that they have in fact stepped in to do some local contact tracing themselves because of the delays. Have you pursued any formal agreements or are you looking at agreements to do that?

**Ms PEARCE:** I would have to take that on notice from a NSW Health perspective.

#### ANSWER

NSW Health has not established formal agreements with Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services for contact tracing purposes.

The NSW Ministry of Health Public Health Response Branch works in partnership with Local Health District Public Health Units to manage and distribute the contact tracing workload according to need. NSW Health continues to expand its contact tracing capacity to meet the demand across the state.

#### QUESTION 7 – Page 39

**The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS:** How many of those rehabilitation specialists do you have currently across the western New South Wales health district, Mr McLachlan?

**Mr McLACHLAN:** I could not give you an exact number. A number live locally and a number fly in from other parts of the State or the country to support our rehabilitation services. I know we have got some amazing clinicians that live and work in the region.

**The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS:** Perhaps you could take that one on notice for me?

**Mr McLACHLAN:** Happy to.

#### ANSWER

There are six full time specialists in Orange and Bathurst, and one part time / leave cover at Bathurst. Dubbo has one full time specialist who works out of Lourdes Hospital.

#### QUESTION 8 – Page 39

**The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS:** Excellent. Ms Pearce, how many specialists do you have working across the State on this?

**Ms PEARCE:** I would have to take that on notice, Ms Houssos.

**The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS:** And perhaps you could provide us with a breakdown by local health district as well?

**Ms PEARCE:** On notice. Thank you.

#### ANSWER

Local Health Districts and hospitals vary profiles and numbers to appropriately meet operational needs and demands at any point in time.

#### QUESTION 9 – Page 39

**The Hon. PENNY SHARPE:** Thank you. I have just one question—and I suspect you will have to take it on notice—for Far West and Western NSW local health districts. Would you be able to provide the Committee with a list of the number of redundancies that were provided to staff to June this year—so basically for the last financial year—and the list of positions that were made redundant?

**Ms PEARCE:** Yes, you are quite right, I will have to take that on notice. Thank you.

## ANSWER

Far West Local Health District – two redundancies

1. Director Planning - Aboriginal Health & Community Engagement (Health Manager Level 5)
2. Manager Community Engagement - Aboriginal Health, Planning and Community Engagement (Health Manager Level 3)
3. Two positions were deleted and three were created in their place, including Executive Manager of Aboriginal Health and Community Relations, Manager Consumer Experience, Community Engagement Integration and Manager, Service Planning

The total headcount for Far West LHD is 784 staff as of September 2021.

Western NSW Local Health District – four redundancies

1. Principal Strategy Manager Kids and Families (Health Manager Level 4)
2. Prevention and Response to Violence and Neglect Manager (Health Manager Level 3)
3. Senior Team Leader – Drug and Alcohol (Health Manager Level 3)
4. Health Manager Level 3 Bloomfield campus, Orange

Western NSW has a permanent workforce of 6,581 as at 2 October 2021. The current headcount is 8,064 including contractors (full-time equivalent 5,607). This figure is inflated due to the COVID-19 surge workforce.

## QUESTION 10 – Page 40

**The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS:** At the beginning we spoke about the initial preparations around housing. Perhaps you could just explain to me, Mr McLachlan, you talked about how you have got the Dubbo Zoo and you have got the motel chain that is up and operating. How many of those were actually in place prior to the outbreak? How many of those housing and accommodation arrangements were in place prior to the actual outbreak that started, this most recent outbreak?

**Mr McLACHLAN:** We have certainly been having conversations with a lot of the motels and other accommodation providers around the region. I think it is worthwhile acknowledging no-one wants to have their motel name attached to being a COVID accommodation facility. So it was near impossible to line up those arrangements prior to the outbreak that we saw, particularly in Dubbo. But very quickly, in the first days of the Dubbo outbreak kicking off, we were able to secure the zoo. It was an offer that came to us from the zoo to utilise those facilities; likewise another motel chain and now the caravan park. But they were not in place prior to the outbreak. It was certainly something that we put a lot of effort into in previous months to try and line up those accommodation facilities, though.

**The Hon. COURTNEY HOUSSOS:** Ms Pearce, perhaps you can provide us on notice for far western New South Wales how many of those were actually in place prior to the outbreak?

**Ms PEARCE:** I am happy to take on notice in terms of the specifics.

## ANSWER

Alternative accommodation was planned, and local accommodation providers were engaged initially in 2020. With the community outbreak in Wilcannia in August 2021, Far West Local Health District contacted all accommodation providers previously engaged. A number of the accommodation providers across multiple communities chose at this time to withdraw their offer as

they did not want to participate any further in the program. Some of the remaining providers did not meet the updated infection prevention and control requirements. Far West Local Health District then had to source other accommodation.