

11 March 2020

Hon Jenny Mikakos MLC
Minister for Health and Medical Research
Level 22, 50 Lonsdale Street
MELBOURNE VIC 3000

By email: jenny.mikakos@parliament.vic.gov.au

Dear Minister

On behalf of members of the Retirement Living Council (RLC), I write in relation to industry concerns regarding the COVID-19 preparedness of many retirement communities. I also seek your assistance in ensuring that the Victorian Department of Health and Human Services:

1. Engages with the retirement living sector to understand the specific needs and concerns of operators providing homes for approximately 300,000 older Australians;
2. Works with sector to provide information and support relevant to the unique group residential setting of retirement communities; and
3. Includes the retirement living sector in future discussions and planning regarding the management of risks for older Australians living in group residential settings.

As you would be aware, local retirement communities are legislated by the Victorian Government and comprise retirement villages and manufactured home communities. These communities are not part of the formal aged care system, even though they provide homes, care and support to residents, who typically fall into two of the seven categories for people "most at risk" of serious coronavirus infection – elderly people and people in group residential settings.

Unlike the situation in aged care, retirement community residents live independently and have the freedom to come and go as they please. They also usually have legislated and contractual rights to access community facilities and services. Retirement community operators have a duty of care to residents, but they are not typically responsible for their health and well-being. In this regard, operators do not ordinarily employ health professionals and are generally not responsible for, or in a position to, monitor or assess the health of residents.

That being said, many retirement communities provide varying levels of care support and reablement for daily living, such as:

- bathing, dressing, grooming
- medication support
- oral and dental care
- continence care and scheduled toileting programmes
- basic skin care and wound management
- support with walking and mobility
- meals
- laundry services

In recent weeks the RLC has been endeavouring to obtain sector specific information and advice from health authorities in order to provide support and assistance to retirement community operators and residents who are increasingly anxious about their health and well-being.

While there is specific advice for aged care providers and hotel operators, there has been no guidance on how retirement community operators should prepare for, or respond to, coronavirus threats, or how issues like isolation should be managed.

I note in relation to isolation, that while many residents live in detached, or semi-detached homes, many newer villages are situated in high-rise apartment dwellings.

In the absence of specific advice or assistance, the RLC is assisting members to prepare, as best as possible, by providing information that draws primarily from advice to the aged care and hotel sectors. This information is only partially relevant, given the independence of residents and limited, or in most cases non-existent, healthcare skills of community staff.

Industry experience through the recent bushfires highlights the stark difference in operating aged care and retirement communities, especially during emergency events. These differences include the availability and skills mix of staff, the limited authority to direct independent residents and the challenge of communicating with some residents in a timely and consistent manner.

It is also important to note that, unlike aged care facilities, retirement communities do not generally have the experience, staffing, or authority to quarantine residents or restrict the people or visitors with whom residents choose to interact.

Members of the RLC are rightfully concerned about the risks presented by coronavirus, and many are concerned about their level of preparedness and ability to access important information and advice. Many are unable to procure personal protective equipment for staff and residents, as stocks have been depleted, or preserved for health care providers, like aged care facilities.

The RLC considers it critical and urgent to engage with the Victorian Department of Health and Human Services to ensure there is a clear understanding of the differences between retirement communities and aged care facilities and that clear advice can be provided to operators.

In this regard, any assistance you can provide in relation to the requests detailed at the outset of this letter would be most appreciated. The RLC can assist in providing communication to a significant number of retirement community operators and will continue to try and support the sector with information.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Ben Myers', with a stylized, cursive script.

BEN MYERS
Executive Director – Retirement Living