

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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NATSILS MEDIA RELEASE: NATSILS and the Australian Indigenous Doctors Association back calls for the early release of prisoners to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

The Australian Indigenous Doctors Association (**AIDA**) has joined the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander legal Services (**NATSILS**) in jointly supporting the demands to release imprisoned First Nations people in a historic open letter authored by ten families who have had loved ones die in custody, along with community members with family in prison.

“Governments must listen to the voices of these courageous families who have banded together to prevent COVID-19 black deaths in custody. The families are calling for the immediate release of First Nations people from prison. An outbreak in prisons is imminent and our health system will not be able to cope.” said Cheryl Axleby, co-chair of NATSILS.

AIDA has highlighted the significance of the health impact on our communities and the importance of early detection, prevention and culturally appropriate healthcare. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are at a high risk of contracting COVID-19 because of the high levels of chronic disease endured by our people, inadequate housing and environmental health infrastructure and the lack of culturally appropriate healthcare.

As Indigenous doctors, AIDA holds grave concerns for the conditions in prisons during the COVID-19 pandemic. AIDA fully supports NATSILS call to Governments to make every effort to prevent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander deaths in custody due to COVID-19. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in prisons throughout Australia already have compromised health conditions, and we must protect them from this virus, as well as prevent its spread to our communities, AIDA President, Dr Kris Rallah-Baker, said.

“It’s essential that the government listens to our families. We need priority testing and appropriate medical care for First Nations people who have symptoms or are suspected of having COVID-19. There also needs to be widespread testing where there have been positive cases. The longer governments wait to act, the worse this will be, more lives will be lost,” said Nerita Waight, co-chair of NATSILS.

NATSILS wrote to the Federal and all State and Territory Attorneys General, Minister for Corrections and Commissioner for Corrections with its policy positions three weeks ago but is not aware of any people from prison being released by Governments.

“COVID-19 is spreading like wildfire in prisons overseas. Many people in custody as well as corrections officers have already contracted the virus and died. The United Kingdom, Canada, Indonesia, Germany and the United States have already released people to contain the spread of the virus. We must follow their example to prevent any COVID-19 black deaths in custody.”

END OF RELEASE

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1. Where prison officers or any person in prison has tested positive for COVID-19, there must be mandatory testing of all people in that prison with priority given to First Nations people;
2. Provide full and appropriate medical care, preferably outside of prison, especially for First Nations people who have symptoms or are suspected of having COVID-19;
3. First Nations people who remain imprisoned and are most at risk, those with illness, asthma, disability or mental health issues, or have a family history of risk factors, must be given priority for COVID-19 testing and treatment;
4. Spithoods and restraints must not to be used on First Nations people in custody when receiving medical care or treatment for any condition;
5. Any transportation to medical care must involve the deep cleaning of vans and surveillance of transfer;

PPEs to be worn at all times by prison officers during the pandemic