



COTA QUEENSLAND

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The Honourable Dr Steven Miles
Minister for Health and Minister for Ambulance Services
health@ministerial.qld.gov.au

Dear Dr Miles

The Council on the Ageing (COTA) Queensland is Queensland's leading seniors organisation and the Queensland Government appointed seniors' peak organisation. COTA Queensland represents older Queenslanders across many areas, including aged care, health, palliative care and end-of-life care, cost of living, energy and water, transport, housing and retirement living and elder abuse.

The recent forced evacuation of 70 high care residents from the Earle Haven Nursing Home has raised an issue of ongoing concern to COTA Queensland and many older Queenslanders. COTA Queensland acknowledges that the prompt action undertaken by yourself and Queensland Ambulance staff ensured that these residents were relocated to safe accommodation on this occasion. However we are concerned that currently there are no legislated provisions that require aged care providers to have in place appropriate evacuation arrangements in case of an emergency event.

The Fire and Emergency Services Act 1990 focusses on evacuation in case of a fire with providers being required to nominate a safe place to which evacuated residents can be moved, this is typically a car park. Under state emergency legislation there are no specific provisions that relate to residential care facilities. COTA Queensland has been advocating strongly over the past five years to have strengthened the evacuation arrangements for residents in aged care facilities during natural disasters and other emergency events. COTA believes that the definition of emergency should be revised to include all events that could have an adverse health impact on aged care residents including the sudden closure of providers.

The Commonwealth Department of Health does have a guideline in place requiring that: *During an emergency, providers are required under the Aged Care Act 1997 or their grant or aged care funding agreement to continue to maintain quality care and services to care recipients. ...Providers of Residential, Home Care and Commonwealth Home Support are required to have plans in place for the management of emergency events.* The guideline then advises that: *State and territory governments have primary responsibility for emergency management and local governments have an important role in planning, preparedness, response and recovery. Providers must assess risk and respond to the advice of local emergency management authorities regarding threat levels. It is important that providers engage and maintain communication with relevant agencies in their services area and participate in any emergency management forums for community groups.*

As stated previously there are no requirements under Queensland legislation to ensure that residential providers have put in place the necessary arrangements to effectively safeguard residents. The Office of the Inspector General Emergency Management (Office of the Inspector General Emergency Management, 2017) commented in the Cyclone Debbie Review that *...it is more common than not that aged care providers require significant support and encouragement in*



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planning and exercising evacuation. A lack of consistency across the range of providers results in varying levels of preparedness and engagement with LDMGs. In one instance, numerous attempts to engage a private aged-care service provider in disaster management planning failed. Inevitably the provider required a significant last-minute response, affecting the evacuation process, and stressing the local emergency management workers. In such circumstances, we note that there would have been an effect on the clients of the service as well. In collaboration with the Queensland Chief Health Officer, the Office will raise, with the commonwealth, the need for all aged care providers to plan and exercise for evacuation to a similar safe establishment.

The Office recommended that: *The Queensland Chief Health Officer should work with the Office of the Inspector-General Emergency Management to raise, with the Commonwealth, the need for all aged care providers to plan and exercise for evacuation to a similar safe establishment.*

Volunteering Queensland in its 2018 report *Disaster Preparedness for Older People: Final Report* added to this call for increased action to safeguard seniors (COTA Queensland assisted in the preparation of this section of the report). The report recommended that the following action should be taken:

Strengthen Queensland Legislation in respect to residential provider operations. Strengthen mandatory emergency evacuation planning requirements through the review and amendment of The Fire and Emergency Services Act 1990, to include other disasters. This is seen as a vital necessary change to ensure the safety of older people living in residential facilities. The review should consider ways to incorporate:

- Emergency (or disaster) plans into Fire and Evacuation Planning processes, e.g. Subdivision 2 – Fire and Evacuation Plan is changed to Fire and Emergency (or Disaster) Evacuation Plans*
- A clause that specifically requires that aged care residential providers (e.g. Aged Care Homes, Disability Services, etc.) have in place full evacuation plans and arrangements to accommodate residents in emergency accommodation if required at times of disaster*
- Emergency (or disaster) plans into Fire Safety Management Planning for Residential Care Providers, e.g. Subdivision 3 – Fire Safety Management Plan be renamed to Fire and Emergency/Disaster Event Safety Plan and amend to specifically cater for residential service providers. Residential service providers would then only be issued with a Certificate of Compliance if they had appropriate fire and emergency/disaster event arrangements in place.*

COTA Queensland wrote to Queensland Fire and Emergency Services in March 2019 requesting that this issue be given consideration as part of the current review of the Fire and Emergency Services Act 1990, however, we have not received a response. This issue was also raised in COTA Queensland's submission to the Queensland Parliamentary Inquiry into Aged Care, End of Life and Palliative Care.

I seek your support in having this matter addressed and I would welcome the opportunity to discuss this in more detail with you.

Yours sincerely,



Mark Tucker-Evans
Chief Executive