



COVID-19 Response

Alcohol and Drug Services

Introduction

This information provides guidance to Alcohol and Drug (AoD) services to support the continued delivery of essential frontline services in response to the COVID-19 pandemic via safe and alternative means that support the most vulnerable members of the community. It is essential that consumers continue to receive ongoing services where possible throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

Failure to provide critical and essential services to vulnerable clients may result in:

- Deterioration of existing health conditions
- Increased demand on scarce hospital resources
- Increased social isolation for already highly vulnerable consumers

This guidance should:

- Build upon the pandemic and business continuity planning already underway by the AoD sector. These plans should be continually reviewed and refined to align with current COVID-19 advice.
- Inform alternative modes of service delivery and support the continued delivery of essential services to consumers, without compromising the health and wellbeing of consumers or the workforce.

General advice

Guidance is current at the date of publication. As the pandemic progresses, settings are likely to change. Services should refer to <https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/health-services-and-general-practitioners-coronavirus-disease-covid-19> or ring clinical advice line **1800 675 398** to seek current advice if unsure.

All services are encouraged to:

- Keep up-to-date with current COVID-19 advice and information for health providers on the Department of Health and Human Services' website: <https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/coronavirus>
- Refer to <https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/health-services-and-general-practitioners-coronavirus-disease-covid-19> for the guidelines for health services and general practitioners, including transmission reduction and physical/social distancing measures
- Stay up to date by following the Chief Health Officer on Twitter, subscribing to the daily CHO updates and newsletter by emailing: COVID-19@dhhs.vic.gov.au

Services should also be aware that for vulnerable patients or vulnerable health practitioners, new bulk-billed non-admitted items have been introduced for telehealth. Further information can be found at

<http://www.mbsonline.gov.au/internet/mbsonline/publishing.nsf/Content/news-2020-03-01-latest-news-March>

Alternative models of service delivery

DHHS recommends that AoD providers **develop and implement** actions to move to an alternative service delivery model based on several principles:

- Ensure the **continued delivery of essential services** and ensure that back up plans are in place if there are workforce shortages or staff are redirected to other COVID-19 duties
- Deliver essential services in **different and safe ways** which contribute to the reduction of COVID-19 infection and transmission rates for workers and the community. This includes **reducing face to face contact** wherever possible and aligning with **current COVID-19 physical distancing advice**
- **Prioritise access as needed** and in consideration of workforce availability to those people that need services the most, based on vulnerability, risk and need
- Ensure that Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) is prioritised and used in accordance with current DHHS advice at <https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/health-services-and-general-practitioners-coronavirus-disease-covid-19>

Key Actions

1. **Prioritise continued delivery of critical AoD** services including pharmacotherapy, Needle and Syringe Program, telephone counselling, outreach and residential care
2. Ensure **priority access for critical AoD services** is given to clients who are at risk of harmful behaviours or who are at immediate clinical risk
3. **Replace** face to face support, home visits and centre appointments by using telephone or electronic consultations, including Skype and Zoom
4. Identify and reach out regularly (via phone/electronics) to high risk clients who may be vulnerable during periods of social isolation and physical distancing
5. Consider culturally appropriate responses for Aboriginal clients
6. **Practice** universal precautions and infection control procedures at both individual and service level, including for example regularly cleaning phones, keyboards and shared workspaces
7. Prioritise essential face to face appointments only for at risk or high needs clients and practice standard infection control precautions. If face to face support is deemed professionally essential, please follow current DHHS guidance to stay safe: <https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/health-services-and-general-practitioners-coronavirus-disease-covid-19>
8. Decisions about the need to conduct a short face visit is at service provider discretion in line with clinical judgement and business continuity/pandemic plans.
9. **Only use full PPE in accordance with current DHHS guidance** at <https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/health-services-and-general-practitioners-coronavirus-disease-covid-19>. Advice on the correct usage of PPE, including how to put PPE on and take it off is available at <https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/coronavirus> under the heading 'resources for health professionals'. Given the worldwide PPE shortage, DHHS will provide additional advice about the provision of PPE for the delivery of **essential AoD** services for suspected or confirmed COVID-19 cases.
10. **For residential rehabilitation**, manage COVID-19 risks in line with advice from DHHS and the Commonwealth Government on actions for residential facilities. While these guidelines focus on aged care services, the principles are applicable to many settings including AoD. <https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/coronavirus-covid-19-transmission-reduction-measures#actions-for-residential-aged-care-facilities> AND <https://www.health.gov.au/resources/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-guidelines-for-outbreaks-in-residential-care-facilities>

Additional information

- **DirectLine will continue to provide 24 hour / 7 day per week support for AoD clients.**
- Clinical guidelines for pharmacotherapy service delivery in Victoria will be issued in separate advice
- The department is continuing to ensure adequate supply and distribution of Needle and Syringe Program (NSP) consumables. NSP clients should consider taking reasonable levels of additional sterile injecting equipment and sharps containers to cover any periods of self-isolation.
- VAADA will continue to update official sector specific information on its website <https://www.vaada.org.au/>

AoD workforce health and availability

If AoD service providers or staff are concerned that an employee or employee's family member may have or have been exposed to COVID-19, they should:

- Follow DHHS advice on <https://www.dhhs.vic.gov.au/coronavirus>
- Contact the 24 hour/7 day per week dedicated COVID-19 hotline 1800 675 398

As AoD services are scaled back to essential services, staff may need to be redirected to support other essential services, such as telephone support. Providers should look at options for flexible staffing arrangements to support continuation of core and essential services.

Service agreements, funding and reporting

DHHS recognises the critical role of funded AoD agencies in the provision of services to clients, their families, and their communities. The Department has published advice on the Funded Agency Channel addressing the funding implications for services during the COVID-19 pandemic. This advice can be found on <https://fac.dhhs.vic.gov.au/funding-and-service-delivery-responding-covid-19>.

Services should be reassured that DHHS:

- Understands funding may need to be redirected by services to implement alternative service delivery responses
- Understands that the participation rates could be impacted by COVID-19

Services should have a prior discussion with their DHHS Area Agency Performance and System Support (APSS) Manager about any service **closures** or major service changes that will require significant redirection of funding.

To receive this publication in an accessible format, email covid-19projectmanagementoffice@dhhs.vic.gov.au

For more information about COVID-19, call the Coronavirus Health Information Line on 1800 020 080.

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