

## **Impact and implications: the COVID-19 pandemic and the non-government alcohol and other drug sector**

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**Introduction and Aims:** The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted both alcohol and drug (AOD) use and supply, as well as the delivery of treatment services. This study aimed to understand the impact of COVID-19 on non-government AOD services in relation to business practices, workforce, service delivery and demand for treatment.

**Design and Methods:** The study utilised quantitative and qualitative approaches, involving three components: an organisational survey targeted at NGO AOD services located in NSW, TAS and ACT; online focus groups with NGO providers in NSW; and an analysis of the administrative treatment data from NSW NGO AOD services.

**Results:** The majority of services (91.7%) reported adapting their service delivery to respond to COVID-19. Whilst the availability of virtual care enabled flexibility in providing support, services also reported increased costs (37.5%) and waiting lists (51.4%). There was an overall reduction in episodes of care in metropolitan NSW, however episodes in rural setting were similar to the previous year. Despite only minor changes in workforce size, there is an increased risk of burnout amongst the AOD workforce.

**Discussions and Conclusions:** COVID-19 has demanded significant changes: to funding arrangements, leadership and strategic planning, the types of care provided, and workforce requirements. The findings provide an opportunity to: assess contract terms to consider new service delivery models; ensure adequate technology infrastructure for service delivery and workforce support; and engage in strategic and business planning to ensure critical response and business continuity plans are in place.

**Implications for Practice or Policy:** The report contains 31 actions for treatment providers, funders and peak bodies (1). The transition to virtual care represents a significant change to service delivery in the AOD sector. A critical action from the report is to evaluate the effectiveness of virtual care models, including the costs associated with delivery, and impacts on specific populations.

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