

**Isolation blues: the role of a peer based ATOD organisation CAHMA (Canberra Alliance for Harm Minimisation and Advocacy) in supporting people who use drugs during Covid-19 Lockdown and isolation.**

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**Introduction / Issues:** During the 2021 lockdown in Canberra (13<sup>th</sup> August 2021 – present) CAHMA (The Canberra Alliance for Harm Minimisation and Advocacy) a peer based alcohol, tobacco and other drug (ATOD) organisation, has supported the community of people who use drugs (PWUD) in the ACT through a number of different Covid-19 specific programs. These programs were forged out of immediate community need and implemented swiftly in order to fill crucial gaps in the ACT's public health response to Covid-19. In particular CAHMA was brought into the ACT's Covid-19 response early in order to provide communication and access pathways into the marginalised communities of 2 public/charity managed housing precincts during lockdown periods.

CAHMA workers were embedded alongside a broad ACT Government approach in order to lock down these areas and provide essential services. CAHMA fulfilled frontline communication and access roles early in these responses as well as providing advocacy and ATOD pathway assistance to approximately 350 residences. CAHMA was also funded to provide frontline workers entering "red zones" to do daily welfare checks and facilitate ATOD and primary health referrals, as well as covid testing and vaccination support.

Additionally, CAHMA staff are employed fulfilling a similar role at the ACT Government Quarantine Facility Ragusa – embedded as part of an NGO team that consists of case managers, peer workers, doctors, nurses and other staff. As the Covid-19 response continues CAHMA finds itself fulfilling a broader role supporting PWUD who are in isolation ensuring isolation is possible by provision of groceries, NRT/tobacco and alcohol/detoxification pathways as well as general support with health and wellbeing. In addition CAHMA has teamed up with Directions Health Services (NGO ATOD provider) to run vaccination and testing drives for PWUD across Canberra especially into high density housing precincts.

This integrated response by government and NGO organisations, especially teaming up clinical staff with peer staff, shows what can be done in a short time when public health is prioritised. It also points the way forwards for integrated teamwork and the Covid-19 response planning as we enter the next stage of the Covid-19 pandemic.