



MEDIA RELEASE

Thursday 8th April 2021

CATHOLIC HEALTH AUSTRALIA MEMBERS MATCH CARITAS AUSTRALIA FUNDING TO BRING CATHOLIC CASH INJECTION TO FIGHT COVID-19 IN PNG TO HALF A MILLION DOLLARS

Catholic Health Australia members have announced they will match Caritas Australia's funding to bring the total amount raised to over \$500,000 to fight COVID-19 in Papua New Guinea.

CHA and its members have announced an immediate contribution of \$270,000 to fight COVID-19 in Papua New Guinea, primarily through the urgent distribution of personal protective equipment (PPE) in remote areas.

At the start of the pandemic in March last year, Caritas Australia purchased \$250,000 worth of PPE and partnered with Caritas PNG to distribute to 19 Dioceses, which reached 235 health facilities and an estimated 1,462 health workers.

The money raised by CHA will provide essential support to Catholic Church Health Services (CCHS), the health commission under the Catholic Bishops Conference Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands. CCHS will prioritise the distribution of PPE and any other support to the provinces with the highest rates of COVID-19.

Catholic Health Australia chair John Watkins AM said the PPE would be supplied and distributed in PNG as soon as possible to protect health workers serving their communities.

"Many workers are now infected and are in quarantine which is affecting health services," Mr Watkins said.

"We desperately need to get PPE to remote areas, including items like medical triage tents which are purpose built to reduce the possibility of COVID-19 transfer.

"The Australian Government has allocated 8,000 AstraZeneca vaccines, alongside PPE and medical specialists to PNG. But whilst this support is welcomed, we know there is also a large gap in resourcing areas outside Port Moresby.

"The Catholic Church Health Services network in PNG reaches over 70 per cent of the population including many rural and remote areas. We have a unique capacity to help and demonstrate our compassion in action.

"I want to thank the CHA members and their company boards who so generously contributed to this important and lifesaving donation. We are all inspired by the Gospel story of the Good Samaritan and this is a fitting example of it at work."

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To date St John of God Health Care, St Vincent's Health Australia, Villa Maria Catholic Homes, the Australian Ursulines, Little Company of Mary Health Care (Calvary), the Mater Group, as well as CHA itself have all contributed.

In the next phase of the partnership, Caritas Australia will also work with CCHS to support community awareness on prevention and vaccination messaging, training of local staff, support for COVID-19 rapid testing and necessary medical equipment.

The donations have been organised through Caritas Australia which has worked in PNG for decades and has longstanding partnerships on the ground, including with CCHS.

Kirsty Robertson, CEO of Caritas Australia, said: "We have been working with local communities and church partners in PNG for over 50 years, and know from experience that local people are best placed to respond to crises, because they understand the context and challenges."

"Approximately half of the schools and health facilities in Papua New Guinea are run by churches, which means that working through existing Church networks like Catholic Church Health Services is one of the most efficient ways to get help to where it's needed most."

"Church partners are also able to counter misinformation about COVID-19 because of the trust they've built with local communities."

"I am glad to see that CHA has been able to harness the church network here in Australia to help us support our closest neighbours in PNG. This means that we can work together in shared faith to reach the most marginalised and vulnerable."

Catholic Church Health Services' PNG program manager, Graham Apian, said the help was desperately needed. "There is much uncertainty and fear about COVID-19 leading to community discrimination," Mr Apian said.

"We have seen disruption to the normal supply of goods and services. The health facilities we have will be forced to close if there is a shortage of PPE."

PNG faces a potentially catastrophic outbreak of COVID-19, with nearly 100 new cases reported daily. On 25 March 2021, 551 new cases were confirmed, bringing the country's total to 4,660 confirmed COVID-19 cases.

However, numbers are thought to be significantly higher than this and the situation is expected to become much worse.

There is currently a lack of available tests as well as long waiting times to receive test results, meaning that there are far more active cases than reported.