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Minister for Health

Minister for Families and Community Services

Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs

Member for Kurrajong

Mr Tom Duncan
Clerk
ACT Legislative Assembly
GPO Box 1020
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Dear Mr Duncan *Tom*

Thank you for your letter of 22 March 2022 to Minister Berry regarding Petition No3-22 – Free Rapid Antigen Tests (RATs) for Community Language Schools which was lodged by Andrew Braddock MLA. I am responding on behalf of the ACT Government as this matter falls within my portfolio responsibilities.

To date, the ACT Government has provided RATs to cohorts who need them most. This has included symptomatic individuals and household contacts, essential ACT Public Service workers, students and staff in schools and early childhood education and care services, disability and community aged care workers, and a number of community and non-government sector organisations. RATs have also been provided for the community through our COVID-19 testing clinics.

In addition, National Cabinet considered the availability of RATs at its meeting on 5 January 2022 and established the Rapid Antigen Testing Concessional Access Program. Under this program, eligible Commonwealth concession card holders can access up to 20 RATs over six months, with a maximum of five RATs per month. Canberrans are eligible to access RATs under this program if they hold one of the following cards:

- Pensioner Concession card;
- Commonwealth Seniors Health Care card;
- Department of Veterans' Affairs Gold, white or orange card; or
- Health Care card (including Low Income Health Care card).

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As noted in the petition, the ACT Government provided two RATs per week to all students and staff across all public and private schools for the first eight weeks of Term 1, 2022. Following this initial eight-week period, RATs have continued to be available for school students and staff and early childhood education and care staff on an as-needed basis, or in response to increased cases reported in a school, noting that COVID-19 vaccination coverage for people aged 5 years and over is now high.

The ACT Government has not previously provided free RATs to private businesses in the ACT as there are a range of procurement opportunities available to them. The Government has prioritised the provision of free RATs for use amongst asymptomatic individuals who could present a significant risk to vulnerable individuals should they test positive for COVID-19.

The use of RATs as a screening tool is considered an important COVID Safe measure for some high-risk settings, such as residential aged care facilities. It is not considered as a proportionate or necessary measure for Community Language Schools as transmission among students and staff is not considered to be a high risk.

Free polymerase chain reaction (PCR) testing continues to be provided across the ACT for symptomatic individuals, household contacts and those who have experienced a high or moderate risk exposure. The provision of PCR testing remains an important component of the ACT's COVID-19 response as it enables individuals to get tested should they be at risk of contracting the disease. Household contacts of a confirmed COVID-19 case are also currently able to access free RATs at the Garran and Mitchell COVID-19 testing centres if they cannot obtain them from their workplace or if they would experience financial hardship.

In considering the current epidemiological situation in the ACT and the current availability of RATs and PCR testing across the Territory, the ACT Government does not intend to provide free RATs to Community Language Schools at this time. I would encourage providers of these services to maintain other strong COVID Safe measures to minimise the risk of transmission amongst students and staff as we continue to respond to COVID-19 across our community.

On behalf of the ACT Government, I extend my thanks to the petitioners for bringing this matter to the Assembly's attention and hope this information sufficiently addresses their concerns.

Yours sincerely



Rachel Stephen-Smith MLA