The Hon Greg Hunt
Minister for Health
PO Box 6022, Parliament House,
Canberra ACT 2600

23 March 2020

Dear Minister Hunt,

**RE: COVID-19 and the criminal justice system**

On behalf of the Public Health Association of Australia, and acknowledging the recent open letter to Australian governments on this issue, we seek immediate action to reduce the risk of transmission of COVID-19 in the Australian criminal justice system, especially prisons and youth detention centres.

As reflected in the social distancing and quarantine measures in place in the community, the virus spreads quickly in closed spaces making overcrowded prisons an ideal place for disease transmission. The people within prisons are also those in the higher risk categories, with increased rates of chronic conditions including diabetes, cardiovascular disease and asthma, combined with an ageing prisoner population. On 30th June 2019, there were almost 6,000 prisoners aged 50 years or older, which is considered elderly because of the generally poor health of prisoners. Indigenous populations are also over-represented in the criminal justice system.

An outbreak of COVID-19 in prisons, which seems inevitable if no prevention measures are taken, would have a substantial flow-on effect in the community. Prisons have significant numbers of people moving through them daily, with correctional staff, health workers, lawyers, educators, non-government support workers, and visitors. Prisoners are known to revolve in and out of the system regularly, with many of those entering prison being held on remand, and almost half having been in prison in the previous 12 months.¹

Prisoners represent some of the most vulnerable populations, including significant over-representation of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders, those from low socio-economic backgrounds, people experiencing homelessness in the community, those with mental illness, and people with disabilities. Allowing the virus to spread in prisons would dramatically increase the epidemic curve.

Healthcare in prisons is often overstretched, and security issues mean that ensuring all people living and working in prisons have their health monitored closely and regularly enough, and then quickly isolating those who contract the virus will be challenging. The kinds of self-isolation and increased hygiene practices available in the community are not practicable in prisons, where large groups often share bathrooms, laundry and eating areas. Air circulation may be poor where prisoners do not have the option to open windows. Alcohol-containing hand sanitiser may not be available.

Decarceration, as is occurring elsewhere globally, is a sensible emergency public health measure at this time to protect the health of prisoners, people working in prisons, and the wider community. We are aware of the many complex issues currently under consideration, so we ask that this matter be referred to the AHPPC for urgent consideration of this matter.

Yours Sincerely,

Terry Selvin
Chief Executive Officer
Public Health Association of Australia

Professor Tony Butler
PHAA Convenor
Justice Health Special Interest Group