

Federal lockdowns welcomed by Aboriginal group as COVID-19 spreads in NT



A COVID-19 testing site in the town of Katherine, in the Top End.

By Cameron Gooley
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The powerful Central Land Council says new travel restrictions in remote Northern Territory communities will save lives, as the federal government works to provide oral COVID-19 medication to Aboriginal communities in the coming weeks.

Federal Health Minister Greg Hunt used his biosecurity powers on Wednesday night to prevent people from entering or exiting dozens of communities across the NT as the jurisdiction battles an escalating outbreak of the virus.

Mr Hunt said the determination had been made at the request of the NT government and local Aboriginal land councils.

“One principle that I’ve maintained is that before bringing in these declarations, which are very significant movement restrictions ... that it would have to be with the consent of the community and with the consent of the [territory] government,” he said.

The NT recorded 1133 new COVID-19 cases on Wednesday. There are 129 people in hospital with the virus, with five of those in intensive care.

According to federal government data, 37,575 Indigenous people over the age of 16 in the NT have received two doses of a COVID-19 vaccine, or about 79 per cent of the eligible population.

But Australia's Chief Medical Officer, Paul Kelly, said further biosecurity lockdowns were required as health authorities urgently work to increase the number of people with booster shots.

"I've been to many of the communities that are included in this current one, so I have in my mind the people I've met over the years in those communities and these are very challenging times for them," he said.

"The oral medications that I mentioned there are two areas that we want to absolutely and very deliberately provide for in the coming weeks. Aged care we've mentioned, the second one is remote Indigenous communities," Professor Kelly said.

The CLC, which has spent the last week lobbying for a greater lockdown, welcomed the news, saying it would save lives.

"The CLC asked for rapid response teams to test and trace and to set up isolation facilities in our communities for the many people who can't isolate in their overcrowded houses," chief executive Les Turner said.

The restrictions will also give authorities more time to jab people who haven't received two doses yet, with the CLC saying it was particularly concerned with the low rates in some communities.

"In remote communities such as in Wilora, two hours north of Alice Springs, only half of the people aged five years and over have received their second vaccination, while in Alpururulam, near the Queensland border, only 38 per cent are fully vaccinated," Mr Turner said.

He also urged the federal government to send in the Defence Force to enforce the new travel restrictions.

The federal government's biosecurity restrictions will remain in place until February 17 and complement existing "lockout" restrictions for unvaccinated residents in communities such as Lajamanu and Milingimpi.

The CLC has stopped approving travel permits for non-essential workers into communities in Central Australia while the restrictions are active.

Remote community residents in Alice Springs will not be allowed to return home without a permission letter from the CLC and proof of a negative rapid antigen test. Similar restrictions will apply to anyone who wants to leave their specific area if they're already in a remote community

