



# NATSILS

National Aboriginal and  
Torres Strait Islander Legal Services

TRUE JUSTICE FOR OUR PEOPLE

## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

1 February 2022

### **NATSILS MEDIA RELEASE: “Our worst fears realised” - COVID-19 prison outbreaks risk Black deaths in custody**

The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services (NATSILS) is extremely concerned at reports of growing COVID-19 infection rates in prisons across the country, and the real risk for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander deaths in custody.

An outbreak at the Alice Springs Correctional Centre continues to surge, with nearly half of all inmates now COVID-19 positive. Meanwhile, cases have risen rapidly over the past month in prisons across NSW and Victoria.

Since the start of the pandemic in 2020, NATSILS and our members have been calling for Australian governments to take a range of justice-related measures to stop the spread of the virus, including releasing at-risk Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from prison, diversion, policing, bail, testing, medical care, housing and social supports.

To date, almost two years on, few, if any, of these proactive measures have been taken by Australian Governments.

NATSILS supports the calls of the North Australian Aboriginal Justice Agency (NAAJA) who today have called for an emergency response at the Alice Springs Correctional Centre, including the early or temporary release of prisoners, to manage the growing outbreak.

VALS have repeatedly advised the Andrews Government over the last a year to improve the effectiveness of policies for managing COVID outbreaks in Victoria’s prisons.

COVID-19 will impact our imprisoned children and adults the hardest because many are chronically ill, living with disability, or parents with children who depend on them. The measures Government have taken to manage COVID-19 in prisons also raise serious human rights concerns - such as isolation in cells for up to 24 hours per day, solitary confinement, cut off from families and legal representation, limited access to hygiene, education and medical care.

*“The rapid increase of COVID-19 cases in prisons across the country is our worst fear realised, and the situation in the N.T is extremely worrying. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People are most at risk during an outbreak — and disproportionately likely to be in prison — and the combined impact could be catastrophic. They must be released to save lives.” - Priscilla Atkins, NATSILS Chair*



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The pandemic has been a missed opportunity to make significant inroads into ending the mass incarceration of our people, to employ decarceration strategies and to implement recommendations of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody.

We call on Governments to do everything in their power to prevent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander deaths in custody due to COVID-19.

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**NATSILS [COVID-19 Policy Statement](#)**

**END OF RELEASE**

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