

19 March 2024

Media Release

Embargoed until 9:35 am on 20 March 2024

Calling for healthcare equity for rural First Nations people

With National Close the Gap Day 2024 falling on 21 March, the National Rural Health Alliance (the Alliance) calls on the government to commit to the recommendations of the Close the Gap 2024 Report to ensure that we, as a nation, realise true health equity for Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Achieving healthcare equity for First Nations people, especially for the almost 61 per cent living in rural, regional and remote areas, is still a work in progress, given the stark disparities in health compared to non-Indigenous populations and metropolitan data.

A significant gap exists in life expectancy between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, which is 6.8 years for males and 6.5 years for females in regional areas. The gap is biggest in remote areas with 12.4 years for both males and females.

"This is why the Alliance takes a stand with Close the Gap in its call to fully implement the 2021–2031 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan and other supporting plans under First Nations' leadership to ensure that we close the gap in health," said the Alliance Chief Executive Susi Tegen.

"Rural First Nations people are challenged by natural disasters throughout the year and feel a major brunt from climate change. It's, therefore, vital to invest in a national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Coalition on Climate and Health. Climate change has a significant impact on the health and wellbeing of Indigenous populations, given the enduring health risks, disruption and impact on livelihoods.

"In addition, workforce shortage in rural areas is an ongoing dilemma with First Nations people facing a myriad of issues with health access. As such, the Alliance supports Close the Gap recommendation to invest in the development of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workforce as outlined in the Health Plan and create a culturally safe Australian healthcare system that is responsive to the needs of First Nations people," said Ms Tegen.

"We strongly believe that workforce training and leadership development programs support First Nations people to take health care into their own hands. Therefore, we urge the government to invest in expanding opportunities for First Nations people on health leadership and ensure that they are valued members of the health workforce," Ms Tegen said.

Media enquires: Kathya de Silva, Media and Communications Officer, National Rural Health Alliance,
media@ruralhealth.org.au
0470 487 608