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AFDA SUPPORTS UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE REPORT FINDING THAT FUNERAL INDUSTRY WORKERS FACE INCREASED RISKS AND STRESS FROM COVID-19 AND SHOULD BE CLASSIFIED AS ESSENTIAL

The Australian Funeral Directors Association (AFDA) supports the finding of the University of Melbourne's "An Essential Service" report that the funeral industry and its workers should be classified as essential across Australia.

The report found that the deathcare sector and its staff are negatively impacted due to not being considered essential, which has prevented them from accessing priority COVID-19 testing, vaccinations, PPE and prevented transport of the deceased across state borders.

This is despite significant advocacy and direct appeals to Federal and State governments from industry representatives.

Deathcare workers frequently attend healthcare and aged care facilities to collect the deceased, but they are unable to access vaccinations, while the staff at these facilities can access them.

The President of the AFDA, Adrian Barrett, said that deathcare continues to be an essential service during COVID outbreaks and State lockdowns across the country.

"Those employed in the deathcare industry are exposed to COVID-19 when dealing with the deceased who have died with COVID, as well as their families and loved ones at funeral services, but they are not afforded the same protection or acknowledgement as healthcare workers," Barrett said.

The report presents the results of an 18-month investigation into the impact of COVID-19 on the Australian deathcare industry conducted by the University of Melbourne's DeathTech Research Team.

"As deaths from COVID continue to rise, deathcare workers face increased risks and stress from the virus that Federal and State governments are yet to adequately recognise," Barrett said.

"A situation in which COVID spreads through funeral homes means staff could essentially shut down that business, which may lead to the deceased not being able to be transferred and funerals cancelled, particularly in regional areas".

There was also a significant emotional toll on many industry workers with first-hand exposure to sites of mass death during Victoria's second wave.

In the report, mortuary transfer staff described picking up the deceased from aged care homes, only to travel half-way back to the mortuary and receive a call to return to pick up another person who had just died. Some staff returned to the same care home or ward several times a day to collect the dead, often completing their task in direct view of living patients who were on ventilators, battling a COVID-19 infection themselves.

Mr Barrett said there were also impacts on workers who had to manage restrictions on numbers and social distancing at funerals and police Government regulations.

The Australian Funeral Directors Association (AFDA) is the national peak industry body with members in every State and Territory representing approximately 65% of all deaths in Australia.

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Media Contact:

Clare Megahey
0477 707 083
cmegahey@citadelmagnus.com