MEDIA RELEASE **22 December 2021**

Balancing COVID safety with dignity, respect, and mental well-being: Updated Residential Aged Care Visitor Access Code released

An updated 'Industry Code for Visiting Aged Care Homes, which aims to balance best practice safety measures in aged care with the rights and mental health of older Australians, is being released today.

The revised Code, developed by 12 aged care consumer and provider organisations led by Council on the Ageing (COTA) Australia, and also endorsed by Aged Care Reform Network members, follows extensive consultation with key stakeholders, including the general public, sector stakeholders, and health authorities.

The Code includes an 'Essential Visitor' policy which requires that residents are always permitted to have at least one visitor, regardless of the COVID outbreak status. The Code defines three classifications of such Essential Visitors - 'Partners in Care', 'Named Visitors' and 'End of Life Care'.

The Code outlines three levels of visitor access, each with its own infection prevention and control measures, ranging from Green when there is little or no COVID threat to Red when there is an outbreak in a facility.

Aged care providers are formally required to follow State/Territory Public Health Orders applicable in each jurisdiction when they differ from the Code, even when they may be contrary to residents' rights and well-being. Unfortunately, these Orders, and advice, are often inconsistent between and within jurisdictions. National Cabinet needs to address this urgently.

The latest version of the Code can be found here: https://www.cota.org.au/policy/aged-care-reform/agedcarevisitors/

Ian Yates AM, Chief Executive of COTA Australia says:

"The Industry Code for Visiting Aged Care Homes provides clarity about balancing COVID precautions with the dignity and wellbeing of older Australians, including their often neglected mental health.

"The Code is designed to inform residents, visitors and facilities when additional restrictions may be implemented based on a declaration by state or territory health authorities following COVID outbreaks.

"A good understanding of when there are community COVID outbreaks is critical, which is why we are calling on the states and territories to continue transparently declaring geographical areas of concern.

"We know that having access to at least one visitor at all times is crucial for older Australian's health and wellbeing. This Code strikes the balance between ensuring that access while also making sure best practice COVID safety precautions are always taken.

Paul Sadler, CEO of Aged and Community Services Australia says:

"The aged care industry has learnt lessons from earlier outbreaks and knows that it's important that visitors continue to be enable access in a managed and safe way, even during onsite outbreaks.

"The pandemic is putting immense pressure on staffing availability in aged care homes, so families and residents may experience delays if there is an outbreak on site.

"The Visitor Code makes it clear how we can balance infection control measures with the social supports that keep older people connected, happy and healthy.

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COTA Australia is the peak policy development, advocacy and representation organisation for older Australians, representing COTAs in every State and Territory and through them over 500,000 older Australians.

Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission

In advice released today, the Aged Care Quality and Safety Commissioner has said, inter alia: "It is up to providers to manage and mitigate COVID-19 risks to aged care residents, including the risks that isolation poses to their physical, social and emotional wellbeing. Face-to-face get togethers between residents, family members and friends should be facilitated where they can be undertaken safely and are permitted under public health orders.

"In determining arrangements for visitors entering the service, and for residents travelling from and returning to the service, providers should start with a risk assessment. This will inform decisions about measures to be implemented that will maximise the opportunity for residents to take part in social activities as safely as possible". [1]

Department of Health

The Department of Health has also said that:

- Providers should make sure that visitation to RACF (Residential Aged Care Facilities) is well supported. Access to RACF by visitors is essential to reduce the impacts of social isolation on elderly people. Visitors provide aged care residents with a range of benefits including providing emotional support and supporting physical activity.
- Any restrictions on visiting should be in-line with (and not exceed) the public health orders in their location. Residents and their families should be allowed, as much as possible, all the freedoms available to others in the community.[2]

The signatories to the Visitor Code remind all aged care providers they are subject to the Aged Care Standards that require a provider to manage their services around the rights and needs of their consumers.

Media contact: Ian Yates 0418 835 439; Dishi Gahlowt, 0434 159 833

[1] Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission**,** Commissioner's letter to residential approved providers – Being prepared for a COVID-19 outbreak, 22 December, 2021
https://www.agedcarequality.gov.au/resources/commissioners-letter-residential-approved-providers-being-prepared-covid-19-outbreak

[2] Department of Health, Protecting Older Australians, COVID-19 Update, **"**Being prepared – visitors and communication with families during an outbreak", 21 December 2021

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