**COTA Victoria 2020 AGM: President's Address**

Welcome to our first online AGM in our 69-year history.

To all joining us today or watching the recording, thank you for your continued support of our people and our work.

I also acknowledge the valuable relationship we have with The Commissioner for Senior Victorians, Gerard Mansour and thank him for his participation today.

The past year has been shaped for all Victorians by two disasters - bushfires and the COVID-19 pandemic.

Bushfires have been an unfortunate regular experience for Victorians. That does not make them less tragic or destructive. It does mean that we have a general community understanding of how they start; how they are controlled; and the extent of the personal and material damage they cause.

That was not the case with COVID-19.

Each of us; our families; our communities; our businesses; our health service providers; and our governments, have had to quickly try to understand what a coronavirus is and the danger it poses.

Importantly, we have had to accept the loss of our freedom to make basic decisions about how we work, socialise and look after our health and wellbeing.

Service providers such as COTA Victoria had to quickly change their operations from the usual mix of personal contact and online delivery from a central office base.

I am pleased to report that COTA Victoria has continued to seamlessly provide online and call centre services from home and other remote locations throughout the pandemic.

That is testimony to the commitment and capability of our

CEO, Tina Hogarth-Clarke and her staff. The fact that Tina had just been appointed prior to the pandemic reflects well on her performance.

I also want to acknowledge the outstanding contribution made by more than 100 of COTA Victoria's volunteers throughout the past year. Our continued ability to attract highly capable volunteers for all aspects of our work is a measure of the high standing of our organisation throughout Victoria.

I am very fortunate and thankful to have a highly qualified group of volunteer Directors on the COTA Victoria Board. Notwithstanding the personal, family and business issues they faced during the pandemic they continued to serve the needs of COTA Victoria.

While thanking all my Board colleagues, I would highlight the work of our new Treasurer, Kathryn Brown who joined during the year.

I also congratulate another Board colleague, Myer Avdibegovic, on her induction to the Victorian Government's Honour Roll of Women. Maya has been recognised for her work as an advocate for individuals and families.

COVID-19 seriously impacted all Victorians.

As the State and Nation-wide recovery progresses, I believe it is important we recognise that a full recovery will require attention to the needs of all in our community.

The issues and needs of older Victorians as a result of the pandemic need to be addressed in concert with those of other sectors.

Organisations such as COTA will need to work closely with the State and Local Governments; community and health services; and businesses to ensure needs are met in a balanced and orderly manner. Special pleading is likely to achieve little and possibly alienate many.

There is no doubt the pandemic has highlighted issues specific to older people in our communities. COVID-19 posed high risks of respiratory disease for older Australians, particularly those in aged care. Unfortunately, those risks resulted in a disproportionate loss of life amongst older Australians.

By September this year an estimated 2.6 per cent of Australians who contracted COVID-19 died from the virus. That is relatively low by international standards.

The proportion of those living in aged care facilities that contracted the virus and died was estimated at 74 per cent. That is relatively high by international standards.

Clearly, that disparity is an issue that needs to be addressed.

On a broader scale, the Commissioner for Senior Victorians report on *Ageing Well in a Changing World* notes that the pandemic reduced the independence of older people during isolation.

The impact has been greater for those who are disabled or lack access to online facilities.

Before the pandemic, COTA Victoria and others had raised concerns about the anomaly of many people over 65 not being able to access the National Disability Insurance Scheme.

The impact of that anomaly on the health and wellbeing of disabled older Australians was exacerbated during the isolation stages of COVID-19.

I raise these points because I believe the recovery of older Australians from the pandemic will likely be more protracted than that of the general community.

The possibility of another wave next winter should not be discounted and we need to take the learning from our recent experience to strengthen our readiness - particularly for older people.

An early priority will be contact and assessment of health and wellbeing needs as a pathway to gradual community reengagement.

COTA Victoria has a range of services and programs capable of meeting that priority and we will be active in their delivery over the coming year. We also have an interest in broader aged sector matters.

The first will be advocating for resolution of specific issues highlighted by the pandemic including aged care deaths and services access for older Australians with disabilities.

The second is more conceptual, but nonetheless, important.

There were times during the pandemic when negative attitudes to older people seemed to underpin health sector policy. Access to hospitals for seriously ill, aged COVID patients was an example.

Pleasingly, that was not the case in Victoria.

I believe COTA Victoria and others need to step up efforts to reshape public attitudes to both the process of ageing and the aged within our communities.

COTA Victoria will celebrate 70 years of active community engagement next year.

By common definition, our organisation will be "elderly"! We have begun preparing for that birthday not by recollecting about past achievements – but by thinking about how we can build a better organisation to meet future needs.

Our CEO Tina is leading a major restructuring of our teams.

We plan to build on the exceptional talent we already have by attracting new professionals to our organisation.

At Board level, we will revisit our strategy to ensure it is aligned with our operational focus and the needs of older Victorians.

So we enter our eighth decade energised, focussed and positive about the impact we will continue to make to benefit older Victorians.

A key part of that is continuing our solid working relationship with the Victorian Government.

Thank you particularly to The Hon. Luke Donnellan, Minister for Disability, Ageing and Carers; The Hon. Martin Foley, Minister for Health;

The Hon. Gabrielle Williams, Minister for Prevention of Family Violence;

Gerard Mansour, Commissioner for Senior Victorians; Jackie Kearney, Executive Director, Seniors, Ageing and Carers, Department of Health and Human Services; Amy Schwebel, Associate Director, Sector Engagement and Service Design, Victorian Legal Aid.

It is with you and our many other supporters that we are able to continue to help all older Victorians.

I am now very pleased to introduce Gerard Mansour as our next speaker.

Last year Gerard was reappointed Commissioner for Senior Victorians. He is also Ambassador for Elder Abuse Prevention.

He is a widely respected advocate for the needs of older people.

He has had over 30 years leadership experience within the aged and community services sectors.

Thank you Gerard for your continued service to Victorians.