

23 June 2020

The Hon Paul Fletcher MP
Minister for Communications
PO Box 6022, Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

RE: Channel 31 Broadcasting in Victoria

Dear Minister Fletcher

I would like to express our serious concerns over the impending cancellation of public broadcasting from Channel 31 (C31). As a health care provider, we believe this is a retrograde step which has far reaching implications for some of our most vulnerable clients and members of our community. We are advocating for C31 to remain in its current format, or at the very least for important content which is otherwise inaccessible if transferred online (such as the 'Move It or Lose It' seniors exercise program), to be transferred to other public broadcast stations.

Star Health is a major provider of primary health and community services across the inner and middle south of Melbourne. Vulnerable groups we work with include indigenous people, members of the LBGTIQ+ community, seniors, people experiencing homelessness and victim survivors of family violence. One of our services works to support older people to improve their mobility.

We have a strong focus on health equity, and specialist expertise in engaging high risk and hard to reach populations. We also engage in community building and health promotion activities to strengthen the health and wellbeing of our local communities.

C31 has provided various minority and marginalised groups an opportunity to hear similar voices and to see similar faces. It has allowed members of these communities to collaborate and to celebrate. It has also been an important platform for sharing news and information. C31 has given rural LGBTI+ citizens the opportunity to be more visible throughout the state. It allows them to share their pride. This has had a positive impact on their mental health and has given a sense of belonging and a chance to feel connected, rather than isolated.

As well as the impacts of the loss of C31 and its important contribution to the well-being of our community we are distressed to learn that the original planned use of the channels bandwidth has not proceeded and therefore our understanding is that the bandwidth will remain unused and available after the 30 June. This is extremely disappointing and we would like this decision to be revisited as a matter of extreme urgency.

Health Programs

C31 broadcasts programs that clients rely upon and enjoy. Some such programs support viewers' health by encouraging them to be more active. The program 'Move It or Lose It' is aimed at seniors and provides them with exercise routines. It is less likely that viewers in this demographic will be able or willing to access content on other digital formats. As well as digital poverty, this community is more likely to suffer from other accessibility issues such as vision impairment.

Community Support

Since the coronavirus began, C31 has reported a 23% increase in its audience, according to an ABC article dated 2 June 2020. This channel has undoubtedly been a crucial source of information and community support. C31 has been able to air religious and multicultural content, educational programs and entertainment. It has also greatly assisted in providing news to various hard to reach community groups. It has given comfort to many and eased some of the burdens caused by the restrictions placed on people's lives.

Health Equity

The Government has argued that programs will be available on digital platforms. This position fails to consider the socioeconomic status, medical conditions and digital literacy of the station's audience. In particular, many of C31's viewers are likely not afforded the luxury of internet connectivity, nor the ability to pay for other non-essential items like smart phones, tablets and laptops, to be able to access online content.

Whilst we do not support the termination on C31's public television broadcast for the reasons outlined above, if this does proceed, we would strongly recommend that there is a role for public broadcasters (like the ABC and SBS) to include important health and other content within their channels (such as the program 'Move It or Lose It'), to ensure it remains more widely accessible.

At Star Health we strongly believe that continued access to C31 content must be seen as a health equity measure.

Yours faithfully



Kent Burgess

Acting Chief Executive Officer