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## **COVID fines are exacerbating financial disadvantage**

Redfern Legal Centre (RLC) is calling on the NSW Government to put an immediate stay on enforcement orders issued to people who have not yet paid their COVID-19 fines.

The call comes in response to an independent review of Australia's response to COVID-19, which reveals the critical impact of the pandemic on people already experiencing higher rates of economic disadvantage, such as women, migrants and those living in low-socioeconomic areas.

RLC's senior police accountability solicitor, Samantha Lee says the review confirms concerns already seen by RLC through its casework.

"Statistics RLC has obtained from NSW Police show the majority of COVID-19 fines were issued to those residing in low-socioeconomic areas and areas with a large proportion of First Nations populations."

"With the majority of these unpaid fines now overdue, communities already experiencing financial vulnerability remain in high levels of distress, saddled with fines debt that they simply cannot afford to pay."

The review funded by the Paul Ramsay Foundation, the Minderoo Foundation and the John and Myriam Wylie Foundation, and chaired by Peter Shergold AC, outlines a number of concerning findings, including:

- The COVID death rate for people born overseas was 2.5 times as high as for those born in Australia. Mortality rates for culturally and linguistically diverse communities were higher still.
- Australians in the bottom 20% by socio-economic status were three times as likely to die of COVID-19 than those in the top 20%.
- Students in the bottom 20% by socio-economic status were over 40 times more likely to have no computer for remote schooling than students in the top 20%.
- People experiencing social inequalities or particular vulnerabilities suffered unnecessarily and paid a higher cost. Much of this could have been avoided if planning had considered inequities from the outset.

"This report is further proof that the response to the COVID pandemic is still being keenly felt by those who are experiencing high levels of social disadvantage," Ms Lee said.

"I still have clients calling up about COVID-19 fines which are now at enforcement order stage. Some clients are crying due to the stress caused by the order and others feel they have no other choice but to contest at court and risk a criminal record and court costs."

According to the latest figures from Revenue NSW, out of the 62,131 COVID-19 fines issued in NSW only 1,350 have been withdrawn with 17,964 fines unpaid and 12,992 on payment plans.

Redfern Legal Centre is representing three clients in the Supreme Court who were issued with a COVID-19 fine. The matter is seeking to have some COVID-19 fines declared invalid on the basis the fine fails to meet legislative requirements under the *Fines Act 1996* (NSW).

**RLC Police Accountability Solicitor Samantha Lee is available for interview. Contact Finn O'Keefe, RLC Communications Manager: 0424 548 019 | finn@rlc.org.au**