



PRESS STATEMENT

Apia, 3 February 2022 – *Submissions for COVID-19 and human rights report 2022 still open*

The Office of the Ombudsman is still accepting submissions from members of the public for its COVID-19 and human rights report.

Since the beginning of 2020 the world has been faced with an unprecedented epidemic which has gone on to affect millions of people worldwide.¹ Families have lost loved ones, businesses have suffered, unemployment increased, freedom of movement restricted, and state of emergency (SOE) measures introduced which has raised questions regarding proportionality and reasonableness of such measures.

To date, Samoa has recorded 32 confirmed cases of COVID-19 cases and no deaths. Two (2) were recorded in 2021 who are no longer active, and 30 currently active (25 returning passengers and 5 healthcare workers).²

Samoa from the start was proactive in managing the pandemic by closing its borders immediately and putting in place SOE measures to ensure that Samoans were protected from COVID-19.

However, there have also been much criticism and the Office has and continues to receive numerous complaints from members of the public querying the impact of measures imposed by Government on some of their fundamental human rights and freedoms. For example, making of vaccine mandates compulsory, questions on vaccine efficacy and safety of children, access to health services where restrictions have been put in place for those seeking medical treatment, restrictions on right to work, access and timeliness of releasing official information etc.

The Office as Samoa's National Human Rights Institution has been closely monitoring the situation since 2021 and will be putting together a report to explore and address issues raised. The report aims,

- to assess the impact of COVID-19 on Samoa's economic and social landscape taking into account vulnerable groups
- to analyze measures imposed by Government in response and whether such measures were/are in line with human rights standards

¹ See WHO COVID 19 dashboard providing updated statistics on COVID-19 of deaths and hospitalizations around the world here: <https://covid19.who.int/>

² Samoa Ministry of Health Public Notice **as of 2 February 2022** - <https://www.facebook.com/photo?fbid=305529308260438&set=a.226234889523214>. The number of active cases is expected to rise in the coming days/months.

- to discuss from a human rights lens best practices and lessons learnt that will help inform future actions in dealing with pandemics and/or any major public health issue
- to provide recommendations regarding areas for improvement to ensure that the rights of all Samoans in times of emergencies are continuously safeguarded.

Calls for submissions opened in September 2021 and have been extended to 11 March 2022. Members of the public including businesses, private individuals etc. are encouraged to have their say by filling out the Office's COVID-19 and Human rights questionnaire found here: <https://ombudsman.gov.ws/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Questionnaire-COVID-19-and-human-rights-final-WORD.docx>.

The report which will provide a detailed and informed analysis of the impacts of COVID-19 on the rights and freedoms of the Samoan people is anticipated to be finalised in June and subsequently submitted to Parliament for discussions and necessary action.

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