

New report highlights COVID-19 impact on disability support workers

A report by the UNSW Sydney released today shares the initial experiences of the disability workforce during the COVID-19 outbreak.

Commissioned by Health Services Union (HSU), United Workers Union (UWU) and Australian Services Union (ASU), the report surveyed more than 2,300 disability workers and shows how COVID-19 has massively increased the risks of working in disability services.

Key findings from the report are:

- There is an urgent lack of personal protective equipment (PPE) being supplied to staff and clients, and many workers feel their organisation's safety protocols have been inadequate in the context of COVID-19.
- There are widespread perceptions that the disability workforce is being dangerously overlooked in pandemic response, and many workers are worried about the ongoing impacts of lack of planning in their organisation and for the disability sector as a whole.
- Workers have been particularly worried about day programs and community access activities remaining in operation; group homes remaining open to other workers delivering NDIS services and supports to residents, along with visitors; and disruption to clients' routines and activities, which has created additional risks to client wellbeing and safety.
- Staff are extremely anxious about the situation, and workforce issues and additional workloads have made it difficult to respond to heightened health and safety needs.
- Some workers have lost jobs or shifts and are uncertain about the future of their work, and many expressed concerns about their inability to effectively self-isolate, and the financial impacts of doing so.

HSU, UWU and ASU recently filed for a COVID-19 Care Allowance to be inserted to the *Social, Community, Home Care and Disability Services Industry Award 2010* in an application to the Fair Work Commission.

The COVID-19 Care Allowance aims to reward disability support workers for their essential work and increased responsibilities associated with supporting a person with a disability who may have contracted the virus, including performing enhanced hygiene procedures and using personal protective equipment (PPE).

The Fair Work Commission hearing relating to this application will be held at 9.30am on Monday, 4 May 2020. The unions are hopeful that the Commonwealth Government as the principal funder of the National Disability Insurance Scheme will agree to support this important initiative.

Quotes attributable to Health Services Union National Secretary, Lloyd Williams

"There has rightly been emphasis on the impact of COVID-19 on health sector workers generally, but a severe lack of attention and support for disability support workers, and this must change."

"Disability workers are essential workers. They provide critical services to the most vulnerable people in our community and deserve the additional support."

Quotes attributable to United Workers Union National Director, Demi Pnevmatikos

"The comments provided by workers expose the fundamental flaws with the disability services system and the fee-for service model under the NDIS. It has left workers feeling dangerously underequipped and overlooked, which in turn exacerbates the vulnerabilities of people with disability and the disability workforce at the same time.

"The key findings including lack of PPE, concerns around safety protocols and risks, and workload issues must spur action to assist this vital workforce during the coronavirus crisis."

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Quotes attributable to Australian Services Union National Secretary, Robert Potter

“NDIS workers are at the front line of our nations COVID response. They are essential front-line workers, still turning up every day to provide excellent care, support and services to people with disability in our community.

“They are not able to work from home or shelter in place, they are needed in services and homes throughout our community. This threat of COVID-19 is real for them. Many NDIS workers are feeling incredibly anxious about the risk of COVID-19 to themselves, their families, their colleagues and importantly the people that they support.”

ENDS

HSU National Secretary, Lloyd Williams is available for further comments.

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