

Tuesday 15 February 2022

Joint statement on Disability Sector Support – COVID-19

The disability sector is in crisis because of the COVID-19 pandemic. People with disability, service providers and disability workers cannot face the latest Omicron wave alone. The sector needs urgent support from the Commonwealth Government so that essential services can continue and be delivered safely.

Free Access to PPEs, Including Masks and Rapid Antigen Tests

Personal Protective Equipment, including masks and Rapid Antigen Tests (RATs), and oximeters must be free and accessible for all people with disability and their support workers.

While we welcome the recent announcement of 1.2 million RATs to be distributed to Supported Independent Living (SIL) NDIS participants and workers, this excludes hundreds of thousands of people with disability and their workers. It is inappropriate that non-SIL NDIS participants are being forced to deplete funding of their reasonable and necessary supports to purchase RATs, and P2 and N95 masks. Support workers, carers and people with disability should have easy access to the National Medical Stockpile so people can make sure they are protected and don't spread the virus.

Disability Workers on the Ground

People with disability need support workers, even when the people who usually visit them get sick

While it's great for people with disability to see the same disability support workers day-in day-out, when people get sick with COVID-19 or must isolate we need another plan. Service providers and the NDIS Commission need to ensure providers have COVID-19 emergency care plans in place and provide clear guidelines for implementation. These plans must factor in the pressures of Omicron. They are essential for people on the NDIS whose plans are managed by someone else and for people who self-manage. Government must recognise the current need for a surge workforce and the ongoing workforce crisis in the disability sector.

Paid Isolation Leave

NDIS workers who are exposed to COVID-19 at work must be supported to isolate without losing income or drawing down on their annual leave or personal leave balances.

We cannot expect a workforce that has been at the frontline of the pandemic to forfeit personal leave accruals to get us through the pandemic. There would be medium to long term risks for the sustainability and retention of the workforce if this becomes the norm. Without paid isolation leave, NDIS services will continue to struggle because if workers lose income, or lose all their accrued personal leave, it will exacerbate the workforce retention and recruitment challenges the sector already faces.

Workforce Retention Payments

COVID-19 workforce retention payments for the NDIS workforce must be immediately introduced.

The NDIS workforce is at breaking point. Workers are exhausted and burnt-out, with many working for days around the clock. Despite working in the same high-risk settings as their colleagues in health and aged care, disability workers have been provided with no direct Commonwealth Government support or recognition.

Priority Access to PCRs

Quick, easy-to-access Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) tests are vital

RAT tests aren't the only way to test who has COVID-19. People with disability and their support workers and carers need to be able to access PCR tests quickly and easily. Our test results need to be prioritised by the states and territories, so they come back sooner. We are at risk from COVID and Omicron and need to know urgently when we are at risk.

This statement is made by and with input from workers, people with disability and disability service providers

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