



HACSU

Health & Community
Services Union

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24 March 2020

Hon Luke Donnellan MP
Minister for Disability
22/50 Lonsdale Street
Melbourne VIC 3000

By email: luke.donnellan@parliament.vic.gov.au

Dear Minister Donnellan,

COVID-19: The Disability Workforce

In the context of the COVID-19 outbreak, we write to you seeking further information for our members who work in the disability sector, including DHHS transferred services and non-government disability support providers.

HACSU members want to ensure safety and quality care for the people they support continues during the COVID-19 outbreak. Our members have raised a series of issues and questions relating to the way they conduct their everyday work and support people with a disability for which we request a response to.

The issues and questions that have been raised by HACSU members are as follows:

- If someone in a group home, whether it be a person with a disability or employee, is unwell, comes into contact with someone who has been diagnosed with COVID-19 or are themselves diagnosed with COVID-19, what processes and procedures have been put in place for self-isolation?
- Further to the above, if an employee in a group home needs to self-isolate, or if a person with a disability wants to self-isolate with family, what is the process for safely transporting people to where they want to self-isolate?
- Many members are concerned about what leave entitlements they have if they need to self-isolate, especially in circumstances where they have exhausted leave entitlements. We note being required to self-isolate does not appropriately fit the categories of sick or annual leave. We call upon the Victorian Government to see that employees are paid as follows:



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- If an employee is asked to self-isolate either due to potential exposure or caring for someone who has been exposed, they be paid as if they worked.
 - If a casual employee is asked to self-isolate, they be paid as they previously expected to be paid.
 - If an employee becomes ill, including ill with COVID-19, they be paid sick leave.
 - If an employee is ill with COVID-19 and they have run out of sick leave, their leave be topped up with special leave to recover from COVID-19.
- With respect to day services we note that most providers are shutting down in line with the Victorian Government's direction that schools close as of 24 March 2020. What happens to employees who work in day services going forward? Given there is a gap in the residential roster for the time people with a disability are normally at day services, day service employees could be redeployed or do their work in a different way. HACSU propose one way forward is that these employees continue to perform their duties but in the group home setting. For example, a day service could bring an arts and craft program to the group home with appropriate social distancing measures put in place. This then allows the residential employees to undertake their required duties in the group home such as cleaning etc and allows people with a disability to continue with their normal routine.
- Further to the above, there are day service providers who are directing employees that when they close employees will need to utilise their sick leave and then their annual leave. This is clearly wrong, particularly in circumstances where these employees can do their work in a different way or be usefully redeployed. We call upon the Victorian Government to provide support and guidance to providers about their legal and industrial obligations and to consider innovative ways to perform work duties.
- How is social distancing being implemented and practiced in group homes particularly considering some of the special medical needs people with a disability have?
- With respect to Personal Protection Equipment (PPE), we have been advised that there is insufficient PPE in many of the houses. This is of serious concern in circumstances where our members are supporting people who are medically frail and require intrusive bodily support including tracheostomy, peg feeding, colostomy and bladder bags and numerous other practices that require employees to interact with others' bodily fluids. What is the process for doing a stocktake on PPE in each of the group homes and in situations where there is insufficient PPE, what is the process for getting PPE into the group homes?
- Further to the above, we have also been advised that items such as toilet paper, moisture wipes and essential food items such as rice and pasta are running low. What is the process for doing a stocktake of essential items in the group homes and ensuring



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group homes are sufficiently stocked with nutritious food? Traditionally, group home employees source these items like any other members of the community from the local supermarket. Given the tight restrictions that are in place, we ask the Victorian Government to lift those restrictions for employees buying for people with a disability and link them into essential supplies similar to Victorian hospitals.

- We also question the need for specialist cleaning crews in disability houses at this time to reduce the risk of infection, particularly in high risk houses where the most vulnerable reside.
- What extra training is being put in place to support employees around infection control and social distancing. We note the Department of Health has developed a training module called *"How to protect yourself and the people you are caring for from infection with COVID-19"*. We propose that a similar training module could be developed for employees in the disability sector.
- What payments/ facilities are available to people whose children cannot attend school due to the Government closures, and their parents need to attend work as they are classified as an essential service?
- We also call on the Government to cease car parking payments in hospitals and other like facilities so that it encourages people to drive, rather than take public transport to continue to conform with the Government's direction of social distancing, and also to ease the increasing financial pressure felt by Victorians.
- Ultimately, HACSU want to see the Victorian Government implement a uniform approach across the disability sector to ensure there is quality care for all Victorians with a disability and safe practices for all employees working in this sector. What work is the Victorian Government doing to ensure a uniform approach?

We understand and appreciate COVID-19 is incredibly challenging, fast-moving and dynamic. We want to work through the above issues with the Victorian Government to ensure we get a streamlined approach to caring for some of the most vulnerable Victorians and ensuring the safety of our members.

I am available to be contacted any time to work through these important issues as a matter of urgency.

Yours sincerely,



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Paul Healey
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