

25 January 2022

Staffing crisis in disability forces COVID-positive staff to work

The Health and Community Services Union has received reports that a major disability provider has COVID-positive workers supporting COVID-positive group home residents in regional Victoria. This comes after several cases were linked to a disability day program, affecting workers and residents across Ararat and Stawell.

The local Public Health Unit granted three workers an exemption to continue working while COVID-positive. The reasoning for this was "critical workforce shortages". HACSU has serious concerns regarding this exemption, as current orders and legislation only allow for an exemption to be granted to asymptomatic close contacts who have tested negative for COVID. These exemptions are meant to be a last resort if all other possible avenues to find staff (e.g. casuals, agency staff) have been exhausted.

The union's understanding is that workers did not have furloughing and isolation requirements clearly conveyed to them. Currently, there is no information from the Victorian Government or Department of Health on working whilst infectious after a positive COVID test.

This situation has left six residents with only two support workers, split across a daytime and sleepover shift.

The disability sector has no workforce strategy, which has led to this situation that endangers both workers and the people they support. This workplace is one of many that has been hit incredibly hard by Omicron, leading to chronic staff shortages. A survey over the weekend of HACSU members working in the disability sector found that 90% are currently short staffed.

HACSU has contacted the Victorian Government multiple times to plan a workforce strategy. The disability sector needed this strategy before the COVID-19 pandemic, but the Omicron wave has made it even more critical. The union is repeating its call for a round table with workers, government, and providers to plan a state-wide response to the current staffing crisis, which stems from long-term issues in the sector.

Disability workers are being placed in an incredibly demanding situation, with there being no clear state-wide guidance to ensure that workers and participants are being kept safe. Nearly one in five workers have reported testing positive COVID-19 since Omicron began, with just under half reporting they contracted the virus in the workplace.

The union has commended members and disability support workers who, despite finding themselves in incredibly challenging circumstance, have continued to provide essential supports to clients throughout the pandemic. HACSU is calling on the government to ensure these workers are provided with safe workplaces.

Quotes attributable to Acting State Secretary, Kate Marshall

"The union is strongly concerned about the safety of both our members and the vulnerable people they support. We are appalled that we have not been consulted on this and that no up to date COVID plan has been discussed with us.

"Yet again, disability has been left behind, and treated inconsistently in comparison with other health services.

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