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## Staffing crisis in disability forces COVID-positive staff to work

A new survey from the Health and Community Services Union has confirmed that the disability sector has yet again been let down, with workers and NDIS participants bearing the brunt of the burden.

A new survey from HACSU has found disability workers have been dangerously exposed to COVID-19. Workers have reported being asked to work while symptomatic, denied access to Rapid Antigen Tests while working with COVID-positive clients, and asked to buy their own PPE. Issues around safety, working conditions, and morale are widespread across the Victorian disability sector.

This comes as the union found last week that disability support workers were working while positive, without clear consultation on this serious workplace health and safety matter.

The survey of almost 1000 disability support workers found that 1 in 10 working with COVID-positive clients haven't been provided with adequate PPE. Under a third had access to Rapid Antigen Tests, with only 27 per cent being given tests while working with confirmed COVID-positive clients.

17 per cent of workers have had COVID since November – with almost one in ten having no paid leave or access to government payments. 40 per cent of workers have had to isolate during the Omicron wave, with a fifth being asked to leave isolation to work.

31 per cent reported still not having access to N95 or P2 masks. Of those with PPE, only 27 per cent have had it fit-checked, meaning that workers wearing intensive PPE may still not be adequately protected.

40 per cent of workers have had to isolate. 20 per cent of those asked to leave isolation to work, with a fifth being symptomatic when asked.

Other concerning themes included workers losing pay for mandatory isolation, lack of training or clear guidelines around PPE, and workers reporting colleagues leaving the industry meaning worse short staffing.

A third of workers report planning on leaving their current role, or leaving the disability sector altogether. On this, one worker stated: "Many of these staff hold amazing amounts of knowledge and experience in the industry and the people we support are the ones that will suffer from the loss of these staff."

HACSU is calling on the Victorian and Australian Governments to provide urgent assistance to these essential workers – that includes PPE, paid leave and income support, priority access to vaccinations, free and accessible Rapid Antigen Tests and a workforce strategy to deal with staffing shortages and a surge workforce

HACSU State Secretary Paul Healey wrote to Victorian Disability Minister Anthony Carbin and NDIS Minister Linda Reynolds on 20 February, asking for urgent action.

**Media Contact:** Róisín McGee 0499 221 525