



JOINT STANDING COMMITTEE ON THE NATIONAL DISABILITY INSURANCE SCHEME

Questions on notice

COVID-19

- **This inquiry was launched before the COVID pandemic was declared. But considering the experiences of the workforce since February with COVID, what lessons are there that we need to learn about supporting the workforce into the future?**

The COVID pandemic has highlighted increasing difficulties with existing workforce conditions. High rates of casual employment, low rates of pay, low hours, lack of training and supervision are all features of work in the disability sector. These are not workforce conditions that are conducive to the management of a pandemic. Workers hold multiple jobs across services and sites in order to make a living wage, workers who are casually employed have no access to paid leave to isolate when unwell.

The comments provided by workers highlight the ways that structural features of disability service systems, and the fee-for-service model underlying the NDIS, exacerbate the vulnerabilities of people with disability and the disability workforce, in circumstances of pandemic. Workers pointed to problematic features of disability service systems which whilst pre-dating the health crisis, were converging to generate unprecedented risks in the context of pandemic. These features include the fragmentation of service provision, under-resourcing, lack of management support at the frontline, low pay, poor job security, multiple job holding, high workloads and unpaid work.¹

The lessons that should be heeded from this experience are that the workforce conditions described above are not those conducive to the health and well being of people with disability nor the workforce. Quality jobs that provide quality disability support need to be ensured. Jobs that recognise the skill and expertise require, jobs that are permanent, adequately remunerated, well trained with career opportunities are jobs that can withstand conditions such as experienced by COVID and will ultimately benefit people with disability the workforce and the broader economy into the future.

¹ Cortis, N & van Toorn G (2020) The Disability Workforce and COVID 19: initial experiences of the outbreak



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- **Would paid pandemic leave be useful/relevant in the disability sector?**

Paid Pandemic leave in the disability sector is vital to ensuring the safety of workers and people with disability.

The resilience of the disability support system and the health of people with a disability is threatened where workers continue to work when (and do not disclose that) they are displaying symptoms of COVID-19 or are in other circumstances which would create an obligation to self-isolate or quarantine. Ensuring economic security for self-isolating disability support workers should form part of the public health response to COVID-19.

The disability support workforce is characterised by low pay, insecure work, irregular hours and multiple job holdings. The disability support workforce faces a level of economic risk which is different to that faced by employees in other occupations and industries. The economic risk for the disability support workforce is particularly elevated by two circumstances, both of which are related to the nature of the work performed.

- a. Firstly, the employees are performing work that may be described as 'essential.
- b. Secondly, the employees are performing work that, by its very nature, carries with it a heightened risk of transmission of the virus (either to the employee, to their co-workers or to their clients or patients) and a heightened risk of exposure to the virus.

Thus, the disability support workforce are more likely than most other workers to need to self-isolate *and* are more likely to suffer economic hardship if they do.

The risk is that employees may continue to work due to economic need, even though public health best practice would require them to self-isolate.

Paid pandemic leave would remove a key financial incentive that may drive a person to work while they are infected or may be infected with COVID-19. However, paid pandemic leave is only one of several measures necessary to support the workforce during the pandemic. The disability support workforce requires personal protective equipment and additional cleaning services, ongoing infection control training, and wage increases to attract the skilled and dedicated workforce that the sector needs.

Attracting and retaining workers in the NDIS

- **What measures could be taken by the Commonwealth Government to better attract workers to the NDIS and keep workers in the NDIS?**

The Commonwealth Government has a range of policy levers with which to influence work in the disability sector. UWU provided a number of recommendations in our submission to the inquiry on possible government action. These are set out below, all of which are directly relevant to the Commonwealth Government. An additional recommendation would be that



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the Government ensure there is clarity on responsibility for workforce matters within the NDIS, whether this responsibility sits with the department of Social Services, the NDIS Quality and Safeguards Commission or NDIA.

Recommendation 1: *The Federal Government as the principle funder;*

- ***Undertakes a disability workforce census***
- ***facilitate, unions, providers of disability support, State/Territory Governments, people living with disabilities and advocates working together to develop a national workforce development strategy to ensure the sustainability of a quality workforce in response to the rapid growth in workforce demand.***

Recommendation 2: *All workers in the sector have access to quality, free on-going training, education and information delivered in paid time.*

Recommendation 3: *Workers in disability support receive an appropriate wage reflective of their skills and the essential work they perform in providing quality disability support. The capacity for wages to exceed the legal minimum must be built in to NDIS pricing.*

Recommendation 4: *The Government recognises the true costs of service delivery including non-direct client facing time and travel between clients for workers and factors this into the NDIS pricing structure and funds it accordingly.*

Recommendation 5: *The Federal Government should facilitate a process to work with unions, providers and advocates to create models of employment for the disability sector that provide permanent employment with predictable non-fragmented working hours.*

Recommendation 6: *A disability worker regulation scheme be introduced nationally following consultation with unions, advocates and providers modelled on the Victorian state scheme.*

Recommendation 7: *There is an independent review of the impact of individualised funding on the nature of work in the NDIS. Where negative impacts are found alternative methods of funding should be examined.*