

18 July 2021

Senator the Hon Linda Reynolds CSC
Minister for the National Disability Insurance Scheme and Government Services

Via email: senator.reynolds@aph.gov.au

Dear Minister

SUPPORTING A SUCCESSFUL COVID-19 VACCINE ROLL OUT IN THE DISABILITY SECTOR WORKFORCE

The Australian Services Union NSW & ACT (Services) Branch is the Union for disability support workers in NSW. I would like to share with you the results of a recent survey we conducted of our members working in the NDIS about their COVID-19 vaccination status and any barriers or hesitancy they experience in taking up the COVID-19 vaccine.

Between 8 and 15 July over 1,000 disability workers in NSW took part in an anonymous survey to tell us their vaccine status and reasons why they had not yet been vaccinated. Over 60% of the responses were from support workers in residential disability services (category 1a of the vaccine roll out), with the remainder mainly from support workers in individual support in the home, community or day programs (category 1b of the vaccine roll out).

The survey results told us that, as of Thursday 15 July, 64% of the disability sector workforce are on track to be vaccinated – with 19% fully vaccinated, another 25% have had their first dose, and 20% have either booked their first appointment or are planning to do so. Of the remaining 36% who are not on track to be vaccinated, those workers told us that concerns about side effects and choice of vaccine, as well as impact on pay to take the time to be vaccinated were their major reasons for hesitancy.

I note that the National Cabinet, based on advice of an expert panel, decided on 9 July that the vaccine would not be mandatory in disability services and rather it be highly recommended, and that the Government would be considering incentives to encourage the disability sector workforce to take up the vaccine. We support this approach.

In light of the data from our survey, we believe the following steps should be taken by Government to ensure a speedy and successful roll out in the disability sector workforce. All of these steps are within the control and responsibility of the Government.

1. **Make the Pfizer vaccine available to all disability support workers** who want it ASAP (regardless of their age or where they work). This will address concerns about choice of vaccine and ensure workers are vaccinated as soon as possible with only three weeks for full vaccination.
2. **Make the Pfizer vaccine available as a priority for disability sector workers in as many locations as possible** – at workplaces, in regional hubs, in GP clinics, pharmacies, local hospitals.

3. **Provide paid vaccine leave for all disability workers** to access the vaccine in paid time. Disability workers should not have to choose between shifts and being vaccinated. This should include additional leave if anyone support worker experiences side effects – noting the high rates of casualisation in the disability sector. This can be provided via NDIS pricing arrangements as a claimable expense for NDIS providers.
4. **To incentivise vaccine take up in the sector - provide an additional paid leave day for all NDIS workers** – including casuals – who get vaccinated by the end of the year in recognition of their essential work. This can be provided via a special NDIS price category or supplement to providers. The disability sector workforce should be thanked for the work they have done in the pandemic, and this would also act as an incentive for workers to book in their vaccination.

We are committed to working with your Government to support a successful roll out of the vaccination across disability services in NSW. We would be happy to meet with you, your office or your department to provide a further briefing on the proposals we have put forward to address hesitancy in the disability sector workforce.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Natalie Lang', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Natalie Lang
Branch Secretary