

10 January 2022

The Hon. Dominic Perrottet MP  
NSW Premier  
52 Martin Place  
Sydney NSW 2000

*Via email*

Dear Premier,

**RE: urgent supports required to enable continuity of essential community and disability services in NSW**

The Australian Services Union represents workers in essential community and disability services in NSW – including those working in the NDIS, in housing and homelessness services, in child protection, youth and family services and in domestic violence supports services.

Our members are at the frontline of supporting vulnerable people and communities across our state.

Over the weekend we surveyed over 700 of our members on their experience of the current surge in COVID cases. We asked them how COVID has impacted their lives and their work since November, and what supports they have or have not received to assist them to ensure continuity of essential services in our state.

I am sure you will agree the results of this survey are alarming. They include:

*Essential workers are contracting COVID at high rates*

- Since November, 9% of our members have contracted COVID. This rate is higher at 12% in the NDIS. In the NDIS 49% of COVID cases are from workplace exposures.
- Of our members who have contracted COVID since November, 23% did not have access to any paid leave from their employer and they did not have access to any Government payments either.

*Nearly 1 in 3 essential workers have had to isolate due to close contact of COVID*

- Since November, 29% of our members have had to isolate as a close contact. Of those isolating as a close contact, 44% were because of workplace exposures (this was higher at 49% in the NDIS).
- Of our members who have had to isolate since November 31% had no access to any form of paid leave and they did not access any Government payments either.

*Supporting vulnerable people who are COVID positive*

- Since November, 10% of our members have supported a client they knew was COVID positive. This is slightly higher at 13% in the NDIS.
- Concerningly, while nearly all our members in this situation were provided with face masks by their employer, only 62% were provided with eye protection, only 45% were provided with Rapid Antigen Tests (RATs), only 35% received training in supporting someone who is COVID positive, and only 13% had access to additional supervision. You would be aware of the NSW Clinical Excellence Commission's "Covid-19 exposure

risk determination in Aged and Disability Care settings” issued on December 31 which indicated the importance of P2/N95 masks and eye protection to reduce the risk of COVID transmission in residential care and support services.

#### *Unavailability of Rapid Antigen Tests*

- 28% of our members are required to use RATs at their workplace, but of that group nearly half (43%) are required to source and pay for their own tests, they are not provided by their employer.
- Only 24% of our members have personal access to RATs at their home for themselves and their household.

We believe there are steps you must take immediately to support our members so they can continue their essential work safely.

This includes:

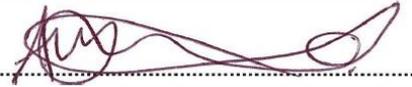
- It is clear the NSW Government’s test and isolate payment is not working properly if 23% of essential workers who contract COVID have no financial support, and 31% of workers who must isolate have had no financial support. The NSW and Commonwealth Governments’ welfare payments are clearly not fit for purpose and a universal isolation leave scheme is required urgently. We suspect this is because insufficient effort has been made by the government to (a) make essential workers aware of the scheme and (b) make it straightforward for them to apply. For example, as of today the Services NSW website still says that you are not eligible for Test and Isolate payments if you have tested for COVID with a Rapid Antigen Test. Therefore, you urgently need to work with the Commonwealth to introduce universal paid isolation leave for all workers impacted by the virus.
- All community services must be given adequate supplies of appropriate PPE for use by their workers including P2/N95 masks and eye protection. The NSW Health’s Clinical Excellence Commission makes it clear that P2/N95 masks and eye protection are the difference between being considered a close contact who must isolate versus being considered someone who can continue to work. It must therefore be considered an urgent problem that P2/N95 masks and eye protection are not being always made available to every relevant worker in the community and disability sectors in NSW. Over recent weeks – and today – there are many community workers in isolation who would not need to be if they were simply provided the correct PPE. This is putting massive and unnecessary strain on workers and the sector itself.
- Rapid Antigen Tests need to be available for free for all essential workers to support them to provide services safely and to protect their family and household. It is a travesty that low-income workers in the community and disability sector have been ordered to source and purchase RATs themselves to make themselves eligible to continue their essential work.
- With only 31% of our members having received a booster shot as of today, priority access for booster shots at vaccination sites for essential workers should be implemented as a priority.

We have a record of working constructively with Government and your departments over the course of the pandemic to support our members and the services in which they work to continue to operate safely.

22% of our members have increased their hours of work since November to help services run, and 10% have voluntarily changed their leave plans over summer to return to work. These workers deserve all the measures listed above to ensure they feel supported to work safely at this time.

I am happy to provide further briefings and information to your office on the results of our COVID survey.

Yours sincerely,



Angus McFarland  
Acting Secretary  
Australian Services Union NSW / ACT (Services) Branch