



Public Service Association of NSW

General Secretary Stewart Little

President Nicole Jess

Community and Public Sector Union, NSW Branch

Branch Secretary Stewart Little

4 February 2022

The Hon. Natasha Maclaren-Jones, BN, MHSM MLC
Minister for Families and Communities, and Minister for Disability Services
GPO Box 5341
SYDNEY NSW 2001

Dear Minister

The CPSUNSW/PSA is the union that represents NSW disability services workers whose employment was transferred from the NSW Department of Ageing, Disability and Home Care to a range of privately operated disability service providers pursuant to the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NSW Enabling) Act 2013.

Throughout the pandemic, our members have been at the forefront of protecting and caring for people with disabilities in group homes and other settings. Everyday they care and support people who are at higher risk of COVID-19 causing serious illness and death. The people they care for are diverse, but in many group home situations they are supporting people who are unable to reasonably socially distance, wear a mask, or understand other COVID-19 measures.

Currently, NSW's disability sector is in crisis. Omicron has spread rapidly through group homes with both staff and clients having contracted the virus. Our members are telling us they are overwhelmed by sick staff and clients, and this is compounded by a lack of access to rapid antigen tests and no statewide standardised approach to managing clients if they've contracted COVID-19.

In late January 2022 we surveyed our disability support members to establish just what is happening across the sector.

The results are dire.

- 77.5% of respondents have had another staff member in their workplace contract COVID-19;
- Only 3.2% have RATs available for clients or staff;
- 35% said a client in their group home has contracted Covid-19, with another 13.45% unsure;
- 22% said they wore PPE only when there were known COVID-19 cases;
- 72% said they wore full personal protective equipment at all times, while 22% said they only wore PPE during an outbreak.

Further, respondents described inconsistent COVID-19 procedures. Many reported arriving for their shift at work only to discover there were cases at the site. This lack of warning means

people will often start work without realising greater infection prevention and control measures, including PPE, need to be taken.

They all reported exhaustion, lack of support and a feeling of despair. Staff are resigning, compounding an already stretched and under resourced workforce.

This is a sector wide crisis that is equivalent to what is happening in aged care, but providers have not given staff consistent access to RATs, and PPE use is inadequate. While clients do have access to test through NDIS, staff urgently need tests to have the confidence they are not bringing a deadly virus to those most vulnerable.

We are urgently calling on both State and Federal Governments to:

- Prioritise the distribution of RATs to the disability sector;
- Maintain a minimum isolation period of one week for disability workers who are close contacts and;
- Introduce the same level of support to the sector as seen in aged care, including a surge workforce and retention bonus in recognition of the significant pressure the workforce faces.

Please contact Thane Pearce, Industrial Manager on (02) 92200937 to arrange a meeting to discuss these urgent issues.

Yours faithfully



Stewart Little
General Secretary, PSA
Branch Secretary, CPSUNSW