FINANCIAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPACTS OF COVID-19

Disability support workers (DSWs) are the forgotten essential workers in the COVID-19 pandemic, despite their vital role in supporting people with disability.

Researchers from the Disability and Health unit at the University of Melbourne and University of NSW Canberra conducted an online survey of disability support workers in June about working during COVID-19. We asked about physical distancing, access to PPE, training and testing and the financial and psychological impacts during the pandemic.

“...I was fearful for my clients, family and myself. I wanted to continue to work but scared that my family may get the virus or that I may pass it from one client to another.”

DSW survey participant

WHO PARTICIPATED IN THE SURVEY

- **357** Disability support workers
- **81%** participants born in Australia
- **83%** participants were women
- **31%** of workers were over 50 years
- **7%** of workers were over 60 years
- **84%** worked for a disability service provider
- **14%** worked for more than one provider
CHANGE IN WORKING HOURS

24% reported their hours increased.

“I have more shifts due to more staff cover required for sick leave and people having to isolate”.  
“My workload has increased significantly. I’m now working 2-3 times the amount I previously was and haven’t had a day off in months, with no days off in sight”.  
“Exhausting, we’ve been assigned more tasks, less staff and more pressure in the everyday workplace.”

DSW survey participants

37% reported their hours decreased.

“Due to the lack of PPE and other precautions a client cancelled all my shifts. I still have one client, but my income has been affected”.  
“All of my casual work stopped due to COVID as it was ‘non-essential support’”  
“My work was cancelled with no consultation to clients, families or staff at the group home. No case by case consideration. No client consideration”.

“I have lost all shifts with the disability organisation; I rely solely on my independent clients and JobKeeper for income”.

DSW survey participants

FINANCIAL IMPACT ON DSWS

DSWs have been adversely affected financially by COVID-19. Overall, 20% of all workers reported that they could not pay a bill, their mortgage or rent or went without meals. Of the DSWs who had reduced hours, 27% of DSWs could not not pay a bill, 18% could not pay their mortgage or rent, and 14% went without meals.

FINANCIAL DIFFICULTIES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Difficulty</th>
<th>ALL DSW</th>
<th>DSW WITH REDUCED HOURS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Could not pay electricity, gas or phone bills on time</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Could not pay the mortgage or rent on time</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pawned or sold something</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Went without meals</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Was unable to heat home</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asked for financial help from friends or family</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asked for help from welfare/community organisations</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“I have lost half my income, yet my employer does not qualify for JobKeeper”.

“There was a lot of uncertainty before JobKeeper came into place. Even as a full timer I was worried before JobKeeper”.

DSW survey participants

MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

16% reported high psychological distress levels indicating serious probable mental illness.

22% of all workers experiencing financial stress had probable mental illness, compared to 14% who did not report financial hardship.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In this rapidly evolving situation, recommendations on how to foster the financial and psychological wellbeing are critical and will need continual revision.

In Victoria, where transmission is high, these stresses are likely to escalate, particularly if outbreaks among people with disability and DSWs become common as they have in aged care.

Concerns about losing pay while waiting for the test results is a legitimate one; DSWs are relatively low paid and loss of shifts can significantly impact on their ability to purchase essentials.

We make a number of recommendations to provide financial and psychological support to this workforce at this time:

- Government needs to ensure financial security of this essential workforce by extending

JobKeeper (e.g. to those who have not been with the same employer for more than 12 months) or similar supports

- That paid pandemic leave is available to DSWs, paid by government

- Governments and service providers need to provide mental health support to DSWs.

We note that the Victorian government has recently introduced hardship payments for workers if they need to take time off while awaiting a test result or if they have to self-isolate.

We also welcome the ruling of the Fair Work Commission to pay pandemic leave to aged-care workers irrespective of the terms of their employment.

We would like this extended to the disability sector however we do not support this additional cost being borne by providers, unless individual funding packages through the NDIS and accident compensation schemes are increased as well.

The risk is that the cost of the leave would result in additional costs for services which would mean people with disability would have less money to purchase the supports they need.
Resources for Disability Support Workers*

National

- Coronavirus (COVID-19) advice for people with [disability](https://www.disabilityvictoria.vic.gov.au)
- NDIS coronavirus information and [support](https://www.ndis.gov.au)
- NDIS Quality and Safeguards Commission coronavirus (COVID-19) [information](https://www.qsc.gov.au)
- [Head to Health](https://www.headtohealth.gov.au) Australian Government website that provides information on [mental health resources](https://www.headtohealth.gov.au)
- AIHW MHSA is an Australian Government website provides information on [mental health services](https://www.aihw.gov.au/)
- Beyondblue Support Service - Information and referral to relevant services for [depression and anxiety related matters](https://www.beyondblue.org.au)
- [Black Dog Institute](https://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au) - for treatment and prevention of mood disorders such as depression and bipolar disorder
- [Lifeline](https://www.lifeline.org.au) 24 hour telephone counselling service
  Phone: 13 11 14

State

- [Coronavirus (COVID-19) Test isolation and worker support assistance](https://www.coronavirus.dbwd.vic.gov.au) from the Victorian government
- Victorian Department of Health and Human Services (information for service providers [here](https://www.cdh.vic.gov.au) and for people with disability [here](https://www.disabilityvictoria.vic.gov.au/)
- NSW government advice for [providers](https://www.health.nsw.gov.au) and people with [disability](https://www.disabilitynsw.org.au)
- [Queensland](https://www.qld.gov.au) government for providers, people with disability and their supporters
- Tasmanian government advice for people with disability and [providers](https://www.healthy.tas.gov.au)
- ACT government COVID-19 disability [strategy](https://www.act.gov.au)

*We include the government COVID-19 websites that are relevant to disability support workers. If you know of others please contact us.