



## DISABILITY SUPPORT WORKERS: THE FORGOTTEN WORKFORCE IN COVID-19

### 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



## CHANGE IN WORKING HOURS



“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



“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”.

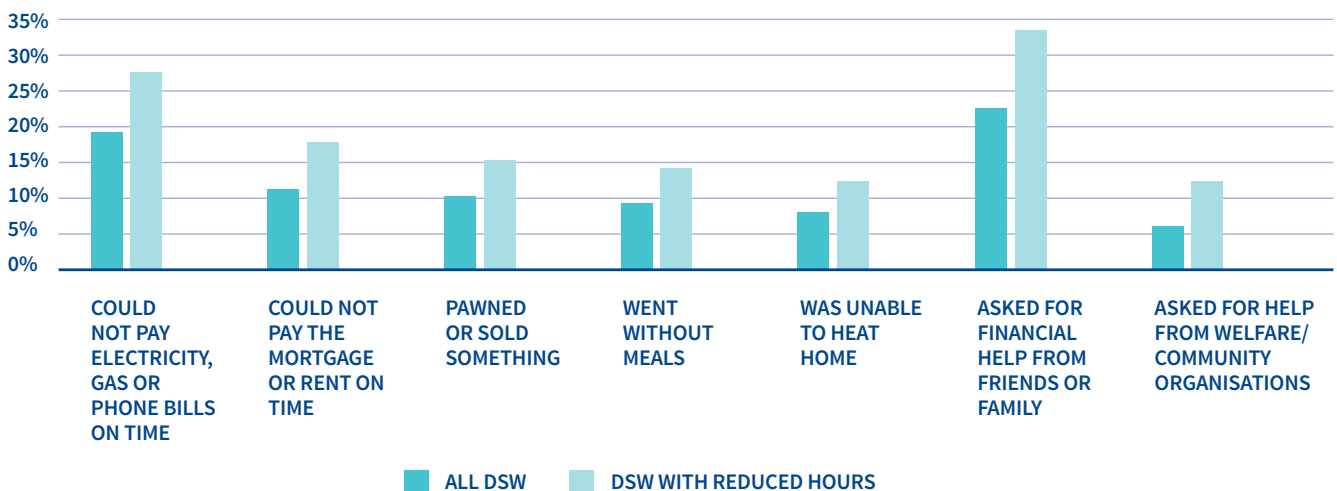
DSW survey participants



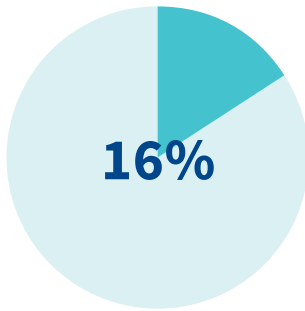
## FINANCIAL IMPACT ON DSWs

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 pay a bill, 18% could not pay their mortgage or rent, and 14% went without meals.

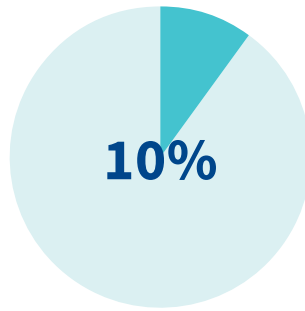
### FINANCIAL DIFFICULTIES



## DSWS RECEIVED JOBKEEPER



## DSWS RECEIVED JOBSEEKER



“I have lost half my income, yet my employer does not qualify for JobKeeper”.

“A lot of the casual workers lost shifts and 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

22%

EXPERIENCING  
FINANCIAL HARDSHIP  
HAD PROBABLE  
MENTAL ILLNESS

“I hope that the disability sector can see the “silver lining” in COVID-19 and see it as an opportunity for increasing the level of professionalism”.

DSW survey participant

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

- COVID-19 information and referrals for people with disability and their supporters about [coronavirus \(COVID-19\)](#)
- Coronavirus (COVID-19) advice for people with [disability](#)
- NDIS coronavirus information and [support](#)
- NDIS Quality and Safeguards Commission coronavirus (COVID-19) [information](#)
- [Head to Health](#) Australian Government website that provides information on [mental health resources](#)
- AIHW MHSA is an Australian Government website provides information on [mental health services](#) in Australia
- Beyondblue Support Service - Information and referral to relevant services for [depression and anxiety related matters](#)
- [Black Dog Institute](#) - for treatment and prevention of mood disorders such as depression and bipolar disorder
- [Lifeline](#) 24 hour telephone counselling service  
Phone: 13 11 14

### State

- [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\) Test isolation and worker support assistance](#) from the Victorian government
- Victorian Department of Health and Human Services (information for service providers [here](#) and for people with disability [here](#))
- NSW government advice for [providers](#) and people with [disability](#)
- [Queensland](#) government for providers, people with disability and their supporters
- Tasmanian government advice for people with disability and [providers](#)
- ACT government COVID-19 disability [strategy](#)

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

## FURTHER INFORMATION

**Disability Support Workers: The Forgotten Workforce** research was funded by the Melbourne Disability Institute at the University of Melbourne. This fact sheet is part of a series on disability support workers during COVID-19 in Australia. **Contact:** md-i@unimelb.edu.au