

Disability workers face illness risk and uncertainty due to COVID-19, survey finds

August 3 2020, by Holly Watkins



“The results from this year’s data strongly indicate that employee and organisational productivity and sustainability would greatly benefit from a focus on these four features,” Professor Bevan Catley says. Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

Disability Support Workers (DSWs) are risking illness with minimal

training during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic, a new survey has found.

Led by researchers at the University of Melbourne Disability and Health Unit and UNSW Canberra, the [national survey](#) also found these workers face [financial hardship](#).

Of those who took time off due to illness, only 47 percent were paid, reflecting the workforce's casual nature. Thirty-four percent faced [financial difficulties](#) like not being able to pay an electricity, gas or phone bill on time or being unable to pay their rent.

The researchers conducted the online survey of 357 Australian DSWs between late May and June 2020 about their experiences working during the pandemic.

Respondents ranged from 18-75 and 83 percent were women. Like health and aged-care workers, DSWs can't physically distance while working. They worked with an average six people with disability in the week before the survey. It also found:

- 53 percent provided support with tasks that require close personal contact like feeding and brushing teeth
- 23 percent had not received any COVID-19 infection control training
- Of the 77 percent who did receive training, 48 percent would like more
- 64 percent had received or purchased some form of personal protection equipment (PPE). More than half (54 percent) received gloves and 37 percent masks from their employer. Notably, 38 percent purchased their own masks
- 23 percent had been tested for COVID-19 infection and 11 percent wanted to be tested

- 14 percent worked for more than one provider and six percent worked in both the aged-care and disability sector
- 30 percent worked in two or more settings, and 14 percent worked in three or more settings
- 27 percent canceled shifts because they were worried about COVID-19 infection and 35 percent had shifts canceled by clients or employers due to fear of COVID-19
- 16 percent reported high psychological distress levels consistent with serious probable mental illness; 22 percent of workers experiencing financial stress had probable mental illness, compared to 14 percent among those who did not report financial problems.

The researchers have made [11 recommendations](#), including updating PPE guidelines, proactively reaching out to DSWs so they can receive the required training, ensuring they have access to pandemic leave and making sure expert health staff can provide back-up if needed.

The survey reflects the situation for workers when PPE was just being made available to workers after a marked shortage in March and April. With cases now rising in Victoria, on 17 July PPE became compulsory for DSWs in hot spot areas.

Lead researchers Dr. Ashley McAllister, Research Fellow in Disability and Health and Professor Anne Kavanagh, who is Chair in Disability and Health and Academic Director of the University's Melbourne Disability Institute, said the situation in Victoria was serious with COVID-19 cases recorded among people with disability in group homes and among support workers.

"This presents very real difficulties for workers with little or no training who now have to implement meticulous infection control procedures and use full PPE," Professor Kavanagh said.

"Some people with disability, particularly those with psychosocial, autism and/or intellectual [disabilities](#), may find it very challenging to self-isolate or quarantine and may have difficulties with personal hygiene and physical distancing. Further, workers are themselves having to self-isolate or quarantine because they are infected or are a close contact of a case. This means that familiar workers are no longer available to support infected clients at a very stressful time."

Disability Support Worker Kristy says, "My work has completely changed since COVID. The day service I work in has closed. I am now working across multiple group homes. Every day we get new advice on what to do and that is stressful. I am worried about protecting the people I work with as many have health problems and if they got COVID they would really be at risk of dying from it. In one home I worked residents were isolated after testing and many workers didn't want to work because they were worried about their own or a family members health. Imagine what could happen if one of the residents had tested positive. If regular workers aren't working, then that will be really difficult for many people with disability who are already stressed by COVID and the restrictions on what they do. I feel like the government has forgotten about people with disability and support workers. All the attention is on aged-care but disability services have the same risks, even worse perhaps because so many of the people have other [health](#) problems."

More information: [mispgh.unimelb.edu.au/news-and- ... ings-from-our-survey](https://mispgh.unimelb.edu.au/news-and-...-ings-from-our-survey)

Provided by University of Melbourne

Citation: Disability workers face illness risk and uncertainty due to COVID-19, survey finds (2020, August 3) retrieved 6 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-08-disability->

workers-illness-uncertainty-due.html

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.