



RESPONDING TO COVID-19: JOINT STATEMENT FROM DISABILITY SECTOR UNIONS AND SERVICE PROVIDER PEAK

Wednesday March 18, 2020

National Disability Services (the peak for NDIS service providers) and the Australian Services Union, the Health Services Union and the United Workers Union (the 'NDIS Unions') have come together to develop principles and processes to support the disability sector and its workforce during the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

This pandemic is a once in a generation event. We acknowledge the scale of the challenge for everyone, including the Australian Government in this rapidly developing situation. The position we have come to is based upon the best information we have to date and may change as new information becomes available. It is important these issues are managed appropriately, to avoid what would be serious implications for people with disability, their families and carers, disability service providers and the workforce.

By providing the right support at the right time, there is an opportunity for the Australian Government to demonstrate leadership. Working together with NDS, Australia's peak body for non-government disability service providers, and the NDIS unions, the Australian Government can ensure the fastest growing sector in Australia's economy is able to continue its vital work through the current pandemic, working now and into the future after the health crisis is over to effectively meet the needs of people with disability.

Principles

NDS and the NDIS Unions have identified the following principles which should underpin the Australian Government's support for the sector:

- The Australian Government is the principal funder of disability services, with accountability for administering the NDIS, setting service prices through the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA), and regulating the quality of services through the NDIS Commission. Its role and responsibility is to take appropriate action now to ensure that people with disability are able to safely access services when they are needed.
- The Australian Government must work together with all State and Territory Governments to deliver a national response to the current pandemic, drawing on the experience of all governments.
- Disability services should be provided to people with disability without risk to the health and safety of workers, people with disability or others in the community.
- The disability sector needs to attract and retain workers to grow so that it can meet the growing demand for services. How the sector deals with issues created by the current

pandemic will influence decisions by workers about whether to remain in the sector or look for jobs elsewhere.

Actions

- Provide funding to ensure all workers in the disability sector, regardless of employment status, do not go without pay when their ability to provide a service is disrupted due to COVID-19 (e.g. client cancellation, self-isolation).
- Ensure immediate and easy access to PPE for all workers and providers.
- Provide funding and resources to support disability service providers to develop business continuity plans that prioritise continuity of client service and security of employment for staff.
- Work with all levels of government to identify properties which may be accessed by providers and people with disability to provide isolation when appropriate.
- Establish specialist support teams. These teams will work with providers to ensure service continuity and would also be accountable for identifying opportunities to change NDIA processes to take account of the impact of the pandemic on service delivery.
- Work with Disability peaks and health authorities at all levels of government to establish a dedicated information line for people with disability, their families, providers and the community.
- Work with the States, Territories and disability peaks to implement immediate and appropriate emergency responses from hospitals for people with disability diagnosed with the virus.
- Provide funding to support providers facing the prospect of service closures to ensure these services can remain viable during the pandemic.
- Working with the sector and NDIS Unions to prepare for a surge in workforce need and that new workers are appropriately trained and supported
- Fund the NDIS Commission to work with health agencies at all levels of government to support providers to improve infection control, including specific funding for infection control training for disability workers.
- Fund pathology testing for COVID-19 to be conducted in specialist disability accommodation and other group settings, with an aim to have test results available on the same day.
- Work with the sector and health authorities at all levels of government to establish and publicise contact(s) to ensure that providers are able to notify the NDIA when support needs change and/or people with disability need to be self-isolated.
- Work with the sector to establish a single and simple reporting process for providers where essential services will be impacted.
- Work with the sector and health authorities at all levels of government to ensure accurate and fact-based public health information is available in accessible formats for participants and their families.
- Work with the sector, health authorities at all levels of government to develop a strategy to ensure continuity of support for people with disability with the most complex needs.
- Work with the sector and health authorities at all levels of government to provide strong local coordination, potentially through Local Area Coordinators, to implement a national plan to triage disability services so that as workers become infected or become exposed to infection and need to self-isolate, the most critical services are staffed and kept open.
- Ensure that NDIS LAC Partners are providing safe workplace practices and spaces for Local Area Coordinators

- Work with the sector to develop a strategy to compensate family/carers who need to take time off work to care for someone with a disability for a specified period.

Processes

- Work with the sector to develop a package to enable a strategic and targeted funding package to ensure that services for people with disability, their family, carers and professional support people can continue through the current pandemic.
- Convene a specialist consultative group comprised of NDS, Disability Advocacy Peaks, and the NDIS Unions, to meet regularly during the pandemic to provide advice to all levels of government and their agencies.
- Work with this specialist consultative group to ensure information about dealing with the current pandemic is released to the sector on an ongoing basis as soon as it becomes available.

National Disability Services

Australian Services Union

Health Services Union

United Workers Union