

**MEDIA RELEASE**

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**PEOPLE WITH A DISABILITY MUST BE A CARE PRIORITY**

Victorian disability advocacy organisations are calling on the Commonwealth and State Governments to give urgent priority to protecting people with disability from the grave risks of a COVID-19 outbreak, including residents in Victoria's 800 disability group homes. This call comes from VALID, the State's peak advocacy organisation for adults with intellectual disability and their families, and Women with Disabilities Victoria, the peak body for women with disabilities.

This call follows the news that there are a number of infections identified in group homes, including a cluster of ten infections - three participants and seven staff - at a group home in Pascoe Vale, Melbourne run by ARUMA, and at least twelve former state-run group homes that have infections to either staff or participants. More broadly, people with disability living in the community have also experienced barriers to getting COVID-19 testing because they have been refused support worker access or are afraid of putting their own support workers at risk.

The health vulnerability of many group home residents poses a seriously heightened risk that, if unchecked, will have a devastating impact on people with a disability and support staff, including increased risk of infection with Coronavirus and greater isolation, which can increase the risk of exposure to abuse and violence.

These risks are greatly heightened by disability workforce characteristics that are the same as those attributed to outbreaks in the aged care sector, including:

- Insecure work – high levels of casual and part-time work with low hours which economically incentivises staff to attend work when they should not.
- Multiple employers and workplaces – many staff are working across multiple sites to earn a living wage; this includes working across disability and aged care.
- People living together with significant coexisting complex health conditions and severe cognitive disability that makes social distancing and infection control much more difficult in the context of a highly transmissible disease like COVID-19.

As members of the Victorian Government's COVID-19 Taskforce, VALID and Women with Disabilities Victoria has been impressed by the high level of cooperation between government,

service providers, unions and representative bodies to ensure a high level of compliance with care directives, hygiene practices, physical distancing and other restrictions.

Through our on-line network meetings with disabled people across the State, including group home residents, we have been impressed by the commitment of the vast majority of staff to provide genuinely caring support throughout these most harrowing periods of lockdown, not to mention the sense of social responsibility demonstrated by people with disability themselves.

However, to ensure group home residents continue to be guarded against this disastrous pandemic, VALID and WDV call on the Commonwealth Government to:

- Heed the tragedy that has emerged in the aged care sector and act quickly and decisively to protect and support people with a disability and their support workers.
- Work urgently with all stakeholders to support the disability sector in Victoria and across the country.
- Establish a centralised support hub and provide funding to keep participants and workers safe, including funding for -
  - In-reach clinical specialists who can be deployed to sites to undertake risk assessment and support staff in all aspects of containment and infection control.
  - Guaranteed PPE supply and training in its proper use.
  - Provide support to people with disability living outside disability group homes to manage emergency requirements for staffing to assist with testing and the period after self-isolation begins.
- Fund providers to ensure workers are supported and paid their usual income and not disadvantaged including for:
  - Providers to encourage workers to commit to a single site and/or single employer (including labour hire agencies) and be paid no less than their former collective wages and entitlements for the necessary period.
  - Paid pandemic leave where any worker, including a casual, needs to self-isolate for any reason.
- Pay staff a COVID-19 Care Allowance to ensure that a disability support workforce can be maintained where infection to participants occurs.
- Fund and work with providers, state government and other stakeholders to deliver a surge workforce sourced from inter and intra-state.
- Identify the disability workforce as essential for the purposes of border crossing.
- Establish a national high-level advisory group which includes providers, independent disability advocacy, governments, unions and the NDIS Commission.

VALID and WDV pledge to work constructively and collaboratively with governments, providers and unions to keep Victorians with a disability safe and well.

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