



25 February 2022

Minister of Health, Hon Andrew Little  
Minister for COVID-19 Response, Hon Chris Hipkins  
Associate Minister of Health, Hon Dr Ayesha Verrall  
Parliament Buildings  
**WELLINGTON**

Dear Ministers,

We write to you in urgency relating to the provision of PPE for care and support workers in community settings.

We have often raised issues during the pandemic because community care and support workers have often had different standards applied to them when compared to other health workforces, for example those directly employed by DHBs.

As you will recall Just before the end of last year gloves were the primary concern, specifically the appropriate nitrile gloves being available for support workers instead of the vinyl gloves which were being supplied and which split frequently, leaving workers exposed to bodily fluids. This issue was eventually resolved, and we thank you for your action to resolve this. Earlier in the pandemic response, the lack of masks for community care and support workers was of concern. Despite not being able to maintain a distance from those they support, workers had to gain media attention to achieve the outcome that surgical masks would be supplied for their visits. We share this background and context because care and support workers are frustrated once again to have to raise the following issues about PPE provision.

1. PPE and RAT testing is required for critical community health workers in circumstances but there is minimal provision of these to workers as of today, and what is provided is drip fed. Workers are provided with enough PPE for up to a week and have to reorder every time they run out. They're constantly having to follow up orders of PPE, and constantly at risk of running out of what they need. Some workers are required to drive to pick up PPE from their employers and RAT tests from elsewhere in their own time, with no payment for the time or the travel. This adds pressure to an already underpaid workforce who are feeling the pressure of increased petrol and day to day costs as it is. In rural areas, workers or clinical managers may be required to drive some distance and sometimes for hours, to access RAT tests and PPE.
2. This is true also of N95s and full Covid PPE kits. These are not made available to support workers in advance when they may encounter someone isolating at home, but rather the workers are required to do a risk assessment at the door, not provide care and support (sometimes this is urgent cares and are then asked to contact their offices for arrangements to be made to distribute PPE Further to this the worker-centered system for RAT test distribution is unfortunately clumsy and time consuming for this workforce – requiring support workers to gather ID, a letter from their employer, and travel to another location to collect.
3. Clients are not being advised to wear masks when support workers visit where the client can, and the PPE guidance most recently updated two days ago unfortunately reinforces that clients or residents in aged or other residential care residences do not need to wear a mask. For Home

and Community Support workers, this means that clients are only be requested, not required where medically possible, to wear masks. Compulsory mask wearing for those clients who can for those receiving care from a support worker is, in our members' view, a simple step which would improve the protection of workers during their visits and would also minimize the possibility of transferring Covid-19 from one client to the next, with support workers often visiting 10 or more clients in a working day, and many more across a week.

4. This leads to the issue of rostering and work bubbles to minimize the spread of Covid-19. Some employers are directing support workers to provide care in households with Covid positive clients or family members, with full PPE, to then travel to other clients who are not Covid positive or close contacts, utilizing minimal PPE for the second visit. In addition, despite the need to risk assess at the door or don and doff PPE for each visit, there is no additional time allocated for this for support workers. Visits can be as short as 15 minutes, and a 30-minute visit is common. This ultimately means workers are doing this work in their own time. Government direction on these matters to providers is needed.

To summarise:

- There is a slow supply from MOH of PPE to providers, and inadequate amounts, meaning official PPE guidance cannot be followed and support workers feel unsafe doing their jobs.
- There is inadequate training for home and community support workers on PPE. They are sent videos to watch and have no in person instruction or guidance. This could mean PPE is not being used effectively.
- RAT testing – home and community support workers do not have access to a reliable supply of RAT tests. Providers are yet to be supplied these.
- Client mask wearing still an issue and the guidance does not assist. The guidance should be updated.
- Crisis packs with adequate PPE are only being deployed when there's a positive Covid case, and support workers do not have access to adequate PPE until this occurs. This system places support workers at risk, and is too slow, too late. Arguably, all support workers should have access to N95s for each client at this point.

The care workers are providing is essential, not optional care. It's toileting and showering, and wound care, and more. Support workers need access to full PPE, and for RAT tests to be made more easily accessible. Work bubbles need to be mandated in the sector to segment the workforce dealing with Covid positive clients/households, and those who are not.

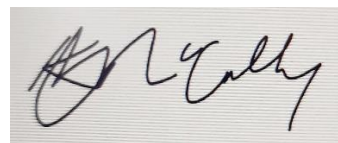
Support workers are feeling frustrated and burnt out, and we are seeing many, at this point, taking the decision to leave the sector. They want to feel that their safety is being considered, and is important, and that they don't risk their clients lives when they go out there to do their jobs every day.

Please can you urgently consider how the above issues may be addressed.

Regards,



Melissa Woolley  
Assistant National Secretary  
**NZPSA Te Pūkenga Here Tikanga Mahi**



Kirsty McCully  
Director  
**E tū union**