



COVID-19 in Residential Aged Care Facilities: Managing your workforce affected by Omicron

11 February 2022

On 1 January 2022, the Australian Chief Medical Officer, Professor Paul Kelly, provided Interim Guidance to support safe assessment and decision making when deciding whether to place work restrictions on aged care workers. [Read the update announcement.](#)

We encourage residential aged care facilities to actively manage their workforce based on this guidance. This is a framework for managing workforce who have been exposed to COVID-19. It supports you to make decisions quickly, noting local public health units may also provide guidance.

Facilities should follow these steps:

1. Determine worker exposure and type of contact (if exposed in the community this may already have been done by the PHU)
2. Assess the impacts of work restrictions on safe, ongoing, service delivery
3. Once exposure and impact determined, refer to the recommended work permissions in Table 1 of the Guidance
4. Document all delegates, decisions and actions
5. Regularly review decisions and the workplace situation.

If a worker has been exposed to a COVID-19 case through social contact in the community, educational or workplace setting, low risk work permission and restrictions can be applied. If the exposure occurred in a household or household like setting, high risk permissions and restrictions may be applied.

Read the full [Commonwealth Permissions and Restrictions for Workers in Aged Care Interim Guidance](#)

The Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC) recommends that local public health units provide advice consistent with the guidance unless there are issues particular to an outbreak site that require a different approach

1. Plan for surge staffing

Residential aged care providers should use their existing workforce as efficiently as possible. Managing surge workforce is a critical element to your outbreak management plan.

Your outbreak management plan should prepare you for the worst-case scenario and you should plan for different levels of staff availability. Consider if some or most of your staff had to be furloughed immediately. The best thing you can do is start putting plans and actions in place now.

Staff costs

We encourage offering to cover additional costs for staff in recognition of the extra challenges and demands of working at an outbreak site. Additional costs may include:

- covering hotel accommodation costs for staff who are concerned about their potential exposure to family members or travelling significant distances to work
- covering transport costs to help staff avoid public transport and carpooling arrangements
- moving casual and part-time staff to full-time.

These costs can be claimed through the [Aged COVID-19 Care Support Program Extension grant](#) (GO4863)

Deployment

You may need to deploy staff differently to manage workforce efforts by:

- moving to 12 hours shifts to reduce staff numbers onsite
- recalling staff from leave
- re-deploying staff from non-outbreak sites (large providers)
- outsourcing services such as cleaning and laundry to free up staff for other functions.

Making sure that senior leadership are always onsite (including evenings and weekends) is vital to supporting your staff. IPC breaches need to be identified, rectified and escalated promptly. Your outbreak management plan should include rostering to cover these critical positions 24/7.

Utilise remote workforce

Engage your furloughed, head office or non-outbreak site staff to assist with tasks that can be done remotely. This includes:

- on-call arrangements to support onsite staff
- remote access to digital records to help prioritise work on each shift, (ie monitoring care plans and daily records for each resident to escalate any concerns)
- handover notes to share knowledge of individual residents
- rostering
- contact calls to staff ahead of shifts to encourage them to come to work
- checking in on furloughed staff and making sure that they understand the return to work steps
- calling family members
- administrative tasks such keeping track of staff and resident test dates and results
- contacting your regular GPs and allied health providers to ensure that these services continue during the outbreak

You can help to retain your workforce and encourage return to work by providing information on your strategies for returning to work including PPE and testing arrangements.

2. Partners in Care

Residential aged care facilities should maintain their [Partnerships in Care](#) program during an outbreak. It is essential that residents are able to maintain a social connection to their loved ones who have regularly provided additional day-to-day care and support and can continue to do so if following public health guidance on vaccinations and PPE.

The [Industry Code for Visiting Residential Aged Care Homes during COVID-19 - COTA Australia](#) supports ongoing access to residents for essential family carers.

You should work with your local public health unit on access arrangements to the Partners in Care program. Your Commonwealth case management team can also assist in facilitating these discussions.

3. Australian Government surge workforce support

The Department of Health provides targeted surge workforce support to residential aged care facility outbreak sites with the highest risks. Your case management team will confirm eligibility and provide access to workforce support including:

- **Access to RCSA agency staff booking portal** - ability to obtain surge staff via the Recruitment, Consulting and Staffing Association of Australia and New Zealand (RCSA) booking portal. Access to the portal can be arranged through your Departmental Case Manager and an individual link will be provided to high-risk facilities. The portal allows you to request staff with a range of qualifications from a national network of around 8,000 agencies. Note that booking requests do not guarantee that shifts will be filled.
- **Deployment of highly experienced small teams** to fill critical gaps in service, improve infection, prevention and control and clinical governance practices. This is provided through standing arrangements with providers including Health X, Torrens, Healthcare Australia and ASPEN Medical.
- **Deployment of Australian Defence Force personnel** to support facilities. This includes teams with mixed clinical and general duties officers as well as additional general duties teams to provide broad-ranging supports based on facility need.
- **Clinical First Responders (CFR)** to do a site assessment of conditions during an outbreak. The CFR may stay onsite for several days depending on the complexity of the outbreak. The CFR will work with the facility to assess arrangements and make recommendations in relation to infection prevention and control practices, outbreak management arrangements, zoning, rostering and PPE requirements.

The Australian Government is taking steps to increase the number of additional staff available to fill shifts through the RCSA portal, including recently retired nurses, trainees and new graduates, assessors from the AN-ACC workforce, and volunteers. In addition, private hospital staff are being integrated into these surge arrangements as highly experienced teams and will be deployed following a discussion with the relevant state or territory.

Decisions on access to Australian Government surge workforce support are made by the case management team in consultation with the facility and local state health authorities.

The available workforce is being targeted based on risk with support being directed to those RACFs with a significant number of furloughed staff and positive residents, or where there may be concerns around infection prevention and control practices or clinical governance.

It is expected aged care providers exhaust all possible avenues before utilising Commonwealth funded workforce surge, including contacting other providers for support; reallocating staff across services within their networks; contacting recruitment agencies; and reaching out to local and private district hospitals.

4. Australian Government financial support

COVID-19 Aged Care Support Program Extension

The COVID-19 Aged Care Support Program Extension Grant reimburses providers for some costs incurred in managing the impacts of COVID-19. Eligible costs include:

- staffing
- accommodation costs for staff
- purchase of additional PPE and RATs
- purchase of other equipment and resources
- waste removal costs.

More information is available at: [COVID-19 Care Support Extension grant \(GO4863\)](#)

Pandemic Leave Disaster Payment

Workers who have lost at least a day of work because they are isolating from being COVID-19 positive, caring for someone who is COVID-19 positive or who meet the definition of a close contact may be eligible for up to \$750.

More information is available at: [Pandemic Leave Disaster Payment](#).