

NEWS | THE OMICRON WAVE

Aged care staffing to 'get worse'

BY ANITA BEAUMONT

HUNTER aged care staff have been driven to tears as they try to cope with an "avalanche" of COVID-19 infections that has pushed up to 30 per cent of the workforce into isolation.

The growing number of coronavirus infections in the region has pushed an already understaffed aged care workforce into covering longer shifts in full PPE in often stifling conditions while their colleagues isolate with the virus or as close contacts.

"Airlines cancel flights if they haven't got enough staff for their flight crews; cafes might close for the day if they can't find a waiter or a barista to work," Frank Price, of the Royal Freemasons' Benevolent Institution which runs several aged care facilities across the Hunter, said. "We can't do any of that. We have to continue providing care 24/7. The compromise in care is my main concern. Without enough staff, we are not going to be able to provide the care that is needed."

Mr Price said their aged care facilities were "fortunate" to only have about 8 per cent of staff furloughed, but the wider industry had about 30 per cent of its workforce in isolation.

"Which is pretty close to what Woolies is saying to explain why shelves are empty and they are struggling at the moment," he said.

Mr Price said their staff had been wearing full PPE and doing rapid antigen tests at the door following an outbreak at their Edgeworth facility in August, where two residents died after contracting COVID-19. But during this latest wave of cases, aged care staff had been putting in longer, tougher hours.

"They haven't had a break over Christmas and new year, they are under constant stress, they are wearing PPE in the hottest period of the year - and risk mitigation says you shouldn't have air conditioning on in an outbreak unless you have HEPA filters, which we don't have, because all you are doing is spreading the virus from one room to the whole building," Mr Price said. "These are predominantly middle-aged women. This is going to be a big drain on them. The repercussion of this is that it is going to fast track people leaving the industry. As bad as it is, it is going to get worse."

Aged care providers fear they will be thrown under the bus when residents don't receive the care they expect - and deserve - because of the federal government's lack of action on staffing.

"Our job is to provide the care," Mr Price said. "Their job is to make sure we have enough nurses and carers in the system for us to call upon to do that. And that is not happening."

Maroba chief executive

Viv Allanson said both nationally and locally, the aged care workforce was stretched and strained and exhausted.

The promised "workforce surge" touted by the federal government never eventuated.

"Whoever came up with this 'surge workforce' was having a wet dream - nothing materialised from it," Ms Allanson said. "This idea that we have a cupboard full of workers that we can call on as back up? They don't exist. There isn't any spare staff. They have had to man vaccination centres, testing centres, as well as under-resourced EDs."

Ms Allanson said the minute Dominic Perrottet stepped up to his first press conference as the state Premier, he "sold out every vulnerable person in NSW".

"All of this was foreseeable and preventable from the day he made that announcement to get rid of QR codes, masks and COVID-safe plans," she said. "The proof is in the pudding and we are seeing the results of this push to open the economy that is harming the economy and vulnerable people. Now everyone is at risk, many cannot work, our aged care services are falling over and our health services are on their knees."

She was tired of politicians hollowly thanking front line health workers instead of just paying them a "reasonable" wage.



MORE STAFF NEEDED: Frank Price, chief executive of RFB Hawkins Masonic Village at Edgeworth, says aged care staffing is the worst he has ever seen it.



DISGRACEFUL: Maroba chief executive Viv Allanson said they had sourced their own vaccine boosters for residents because they hadn't heard from the Commonwealth.

Labor slams treatment of residents, staff

THE health and aged care minister has hit back at claims elderly Australians are languishing in "diabolical" conditions with almost 500 facilities tackling COVID-19 outbreaks.

A spokesman for Greg Hunt said Labor was "playing politics with senior Australians" after aged care spokeswoman Clare O'Neil said there were "horrific implications" for about 200,000 older Australians in residential aged care.

"The brutal reality of this is people are not getting properly cared for," Ms O'Neil

said on Wednesday. "They're not getting showered, they are probably sitting in pads ... people don't get enough to eat, people don't have anyone to talk to."

"This is just the human interaction that you and I as people need to survive with our physical and mental health."

But Mr Hunt's spokeswoman said senior Australians have been a priority throughout the pandemic, noting the country has had one of the lowest levels of loss of life in aged care from the pandemic.

"Caring for senior Australians has been a priority throughout the pandemic," she said.

"Aged care is being prioritised for rapid antigen tests with the program beginning in August last year and with 5.6 million tests being delivered - the largest deployment across the country of tests from the national medical stockpile."

Ms O'Neil also targeted the government over its treatment of aged care staff, saying they had also been forgotten with less than one-in-three having received a

COVID-19 booster shot.

"The staff are the ones who come in and out of the facility. For better or worse, they're having contact with people outside, they need to be vaccinated fully," Ms O'Neil said.

Inconsistent rules around booster mandates for staff between states and territories is also making it harder for facilities to operate and manage staff, she said.

"We've got no leadership from the federal government around vaccine mandates for a booster for aged care staff."

Mr Hunt's spokeswoman



They're not getting showered, they are probably sitting in pads ... people don't get enough to eat, people don't have anyone to talk to.

Clare O'Neil

said booster shots for residents and staff had been administered across 1700 facilities, with thirds jabs being well ahead of schedule.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison is seeking advice on how to maximise the workforce as a rising number of workers seek sick leave to deal with COVID-19.

Under a proposed plan, staff in essential services would continue to work after an exposure provided they have a negative rapid test, with regular testing afterwards.

— DOMINIC GIANNINI