

ACTION

FOR AGED CARE

Workers Demand Policy Reform

We need a renewed commitment to our older Australians. The COVID-19 pandemic has clearly highlighted the fault lines of the aged care system, a system that was already in crisis. It has shown that urgent and major reform to improve care outcomes and support for the workforce, is required. Only through a substantial increase in funding with expenditure transparency measures, mandated minimum staffing levels across a mix of skills, and improved wages and conditions of the workforce, can the aged care sector provide the high-quality care that older Australians deserve. The Government can no longer afford its inaction. **Change is needed now.**

Our policy recommendations for urgent residential aged care reform must include:

1 Mandated minimum staffing levels and required mix of skills and qualifications in every residential facility, over every shift.

Australia's aged care sector is indisputably understaffed and the workers who are there are doing the best they can to hold the system together with little support, few resources, and limited recognition by providers and Government. Workloads in aged care are often unmanageable and can lead to risks for workers and care recipients alike. This has been intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic across the sector.

A world-class aged care system is one that captures whole of person needs – clinical, physical, social and emotional. To deliver this holistic model of care a large, stable and diversely qualified workforce is required. Aged care providers must be required to increase their staffing levels and skills mix to deliver safe quality care for older Australians.

The amount of direct care time residents should receive, from a skills mix of staff, should be mandated under legislation and accompanied by transparent reporting requirements on a facility's workforce planning practices, including staffing levels to care needs profile and staff training.

Higher levels of staffing and better skills mix would improve holistic, person-centered care in line with the care recipient and community expectations. In times of crisis, it would ensure preparedness, safety, and greater support for older Australians and workers. It would include better infection control, continuity of care and health outcomes, as well as greater support to staff.

2 Transparency and accountability for Government funding.

There is a lack of transparency and accountability for spending in aged care. Well targeted aged care reforms can only be achieved if we know how the Commonwealth money provided to the sector is being spent. Compelling providers under legislation to be transparent about how they allocate public funds should be a priority for Government; as it is for older Australians, aged care workers and the wider community. There should be no ambiguity as to how taxpayer money is spent.

Companies that receive substantial taxpayer dollars from the Government, including those that operate in highly-profitable private models must be required by law to meet higher standards of financial transparency and public accountability. We call upon the Government, Opposition, and crossbench Senators to work together to make laws to ensure aged care providers are prevented from putting profit before people and are compelled to provide clear records of their business dealings and practices.

3 Mandated training requirements (including infection control and ongoing professional development) accessible to all staff and paid by employer.

The absence of formalised minimum training and qualification standards undermines the quality of care available in Australia's aged care system. For example personal care workers (however titled) are a large and essential part of the sector who are undervalued and do not have a minimum workforce entry qualification, nor do they have a positive regulation scheme to support them in their role.

Further, aged care staff report a dearth in specialised training for specific care areas (e.g. dementia, infection control, fall prevention) and supported continued professional development. As older Australians enter residential care later in life with increasing comorbidities, it is essential that those responsible for care provision are supported to enrich their skill set and provide evidenced based care.

There is a sectoral culture of placing the onus of responsibility on individual workers to upskill. The levels of training and qualification standards of staff does not have a direct relationship to the regulation and accreditation of providers. Employer supported continued professional development can play an important role in elevating job satisfaction and wages, thereby reducing staff turnover and vastly improving care outcomes. To ensure providers, workers and older Australians all experience these benefits, a positive workforce regulation scheme (for those who are not registered) embedded with mandated training and qualification standards for aged care staff should be introduced.

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Government funding is required to be increased, linked to the provision of care and the direct employment of permanent staff with decent pay and enough hours to live on.

The Federal Government is the regulator and the primary funder of aged care, and is responsible for ensuring the financial viability, stability, and sustainability of the aged care sector. Older Australians deserve quality individualised care, dignity and respect in aged care services at all times, especially during a dangerous and terrifying pandemic. COVID-19 has increased care needs across both the residential and home care sectors. But aged care has been a calamity for years in the making on the Coalition's watch. The Federal Government cut \$1.7 billion from aged care in 2016-17. Cuts that have made the current crisis worse.

The COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare the problems in aged care in Australia with chronic low wages, understaffing, inadequate training, insecure work and staff working across multiple employers in order to pay the bills. Insecure, underpaid and undervalued work must end. A focus should be on permanency of employment and maximizing hours for employees to avoid the need to work across multiple sites. Facilities that provide a stable and permanent workforce will have better outcomes for care recipients.

Government funding that is linked to the provision of care should direct employment of permanent staff with decent pay and enough hours to live on. Increased funding for the purposes of meaningful wage increases is required urgently. Continuing to go without will only further exacerbate the issues in care and workforce stability that have been pushed to the fore during the pandemic.