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PPE lottery: disability sector left to source own PPE from China, Bunnings

As masks became mandatory across Victoria, concern has abounded in the disability sector about how Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) could be accessed.

It is conservatively estimated that over 200,000 masks are required for people working in the disability sector each week in Victoria alone.

But with nothing like this volume being provided directly to the sector, or accessible through the National Medical Stockpile, many disability service providers have had to source their own provisions.

In early August, a Victorian State Government spokesperson reported that only 195,600 masks had been provided to disability providers from the state stockpile to date – less than one week's supply.

The COVID-19 pandemic has been a scary time for many working in the disability sector, such as disability support worker, Bianca Mazzocchi.

Bianca works at Able Australia – a disability service provider that has secured PPE for its own workforce and others in the sector – but Bianca knows through friends in the industry that securing PPE remains a serious issue.

'We work with some of the most vulnerable people in the community when it comes to COVID-19. Many have other health complications that make them highly susceptible to the impacts of coronavirus,' said Bianca.

'I'm fortunate that at my workplace our leadership has secured masks, gowns and Face Shields but I know through talking to others in the industry that lack of PPE remains a massive issue and concern.'

Kate MacRae, CEO of Able Australia, says she recognised very early on that not only would Able Australia require PPE to safely service its own clients, but the sector as a whole would require these too.

‘When the pandemic was first declared, we knew access to PPE was going to be critical to our sector. Seeing how badly local supply chains were faring and with no access to the National Medical Stockpile, we proactively purchased 650,000 masks during the first wave and since then, have ordered another 500,000+ for our workforce and for the disability sector, more broadly –at considerable financial risk to us.’

Fortunately, the decision to coordinate with other disability service providers and spend over a million dollars on masks was soon vindicated. The stock was distributed to others in the industry at a time when there was no clear ETA around when PPE stock might become available through the National Medical Stockpile.

‘It was something of a risk placing such a large order because there was a lot of uncertainty around ordering the masks. We were trying to establish a new supply chain overseas in the midst of a global pandemic, determine what type of mask to order and pay for the masks, sight unseen. Fortunately the masks we ordered were fit for purpose.’ said Ms MacRae.

‘We then distributed them to others in the sector. With disability service providers going through tens of thousands of masks a month, we felt compelled to act. We had to act unilaterally and swiftly in order to protect staff and clients.’ I think we should acknowledge face shields too, as we were months ahead of this requirement.

Sadly the scramble for PPE continues. When the DHHS announced that N95 masks were mandatory for use when there is a COVID positive case, Able Australia had to turn to Bunnings to boost its supplies.

‘When we heard news of the new regulation, I had my team purchase 1,000 N95 masks from Bunnings immediately,’ said Ms MacRae.

‘While we have not yet had a COVID positive case in our organisation, we would have been derelict in our duty had we not bolstered our stocks of N95 masks in light of the new directive. We need to have all the correct equipment at the ready so that we can respond quickly if we were to have a COVID positive case. Trying to source the right PPE after the fact just doesn’t work.’

Bianca says the lack of PPE for people with disability and staff who work in the sector needs to be addressed to avoid a scenario where people with high care and resource needs could end up in the emergency departments of hospitals.

‘No one wants the disability sector to fail but disability service providers cannot do this alone. While Able and our network have accessed the PPE we have brought into the

country, what of the other providers? As a sector, we need proper coordination and support from the Government to avert a bigger crisis,' said Bianca.

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About Able Australia

Able Australia is a leading provider of disability services for adults and community supports for seniors. Established over 50 years ago to provide support to the deafblind community, we are now a diverse not-for-profit organisation offering a broad range of high quality services. We currently provide support in Melbourne, Tasmania, ACT and SE Queensland. For more information about Able Australia go to www.ableaustralia.org.au