

8 April 2022

The Hon. Natasha Maclaren-Jones, MLC
Minister for Families and Communities;
Minister for Disability Services
52 Martin Place
SYDNEY NSW 2000

Dear Minister Maclaren-Jones

COVID-19 Booster Mandate - Disability

Ability Options is a large, reputable and enduring Provider of Disability and Employment Services in NSW. Since 1976 we have served some of our most vulnerable communities. Like others in our sector, we have been passionate advocates of, and pushed for the provision of COVID-19 vaccinations in Disability as a priority. We worked closely with our colleagues in NSW Health, the Commonwealth Department of Health and contracted Vaccination Providers to keep everyone as safe as was possible. We have supported and invested significantly in the management of the pandemic in every way. This included the vaccine mandate last year which did, in the end, cost some vaccine hesitant, but dedicated and experienced staff their careers in a sector which struggles to find and keep people.

We took the public health messages, our values and mission and our WHS obligations to heart and interpreted the double dose mandate to apply to our whole workforce. The vast majority of staff complied, ensuring we met the requirements of the PHO and the health advice. We worked hard to support our 1200 staff to do the right thing, despite much concern, and they stood up to the requirement. We are proud of their efforts to make our community safer. Staff in our sector very often have their own experiences of disability and vulnerability. They are heart and soul committed to serving those who need us.

Staff are much more reticent this time around and have more concerns about a third dose/booster. We are likely to lose many more employees this time and we will struggle to make services safe in the timescale required. There is now a decision to make, including our legal obligations, to provide services as well as meet PHOs and WHS obligations.

There seem to be three main reasons for the hesitancy (beyond some of the silliness people find on social media)

- Staff don't want to be in a never-ending cycle of booster mandates
- Some employees had very nasty side effects from the first or second dose including hospitalisation and the medical exemption forms are not updated for experiences like this with the first two doses and

- NSW Health employees don't have to have a booster. Our staff wonder now whether the public health has become a secondary driver

I have to add that I and our Managers and HR team face daily draws on our time and energy, not only managing case by case but also working with colleagues' genuinely held fears, accepting the criticisms and in some cases hate mail and threats that you have no doubt also seen.

We have all done this because we want to keep our communities safe.

We would request that, at the very least, you look to

- Review Medical Exemptions in the light of medical contraindications which occurred for small numbers of people after their first two doses and update the rules to allow for those
- Explain why NSW Health only requires workers to have received two vaccination doses whilst the public health order for Ageing and Disability requires three.

Many thanks for your consideration

Best wishes



Julia Squire
CEO