

Supporting your Aboriginal Workforce over 50 years during COVID-19 Pandemic



The Australian Government has strongly encouraged Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people over 50, living with one or more chronic illnesses to self-isolate during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is strongly encouraged however not mandatory. The impacts of this recommendation can cause immense impact on individuals, Communities, and organisations.

Aboriginal employees over 50 years living with a chronic illness:

Employees are not obliged to notify their employer of any chronic illness if it does not have the potential to create an unsafe workplace for themselves or their employee. Employers should take the necessary steps to protect their staff, clients and broader Communities. During this process, privacy and confidentiality must be paramount when discussing private medical information.

Aboriginal people over 50 years living with chronic illness are more susceptible to contracting the virus, and Aboriginal people looking after children or Elders are also at risk of carrying the virus.

The Australian government advised that those who undertake essential work must take a risk assessment, and advised the following:

- Risk needs to be assessed and mitigated with consideration of the characteristics of the worker, advice from their GP, the workplace and the work.
- This includes ensuring vulnerable people are redeployed to non-customer based roles where possible.
- Where risk cannot be appropriately mitigated, employers and employees should consider alternative arrangements to accommodate a workplace absence.
- Special provisions apply to essential workers who are at higher risk of serious illness and, where the risk cannot be sufficiently mitigated, should not work in high-risk settings.

If an employee is suspected to be at risk of contracting or carrying the virus causing COVID-19, an employer can instruct them to commence working from home. Likewise, an employee who might be susceptible to either carrying or contracting COVID-19, can request to work from home. The following should be considered to best support Aboriginal employees and stop the spread of COVID-19.

Operational Considerations:

- Can this employee work from home?
- How can the organisation support them do so? Is training needed, ie how to use Zoom
- Could there be opportunities to redeploy into another business unit?
- What adjustments could be made to the tasks they perform?

Managing Front Line Service Delivery Anxiety in your workforce aged 50 years and over

- Support employees and inform them of all leave options, eg annual leave, long service leave, LWOP
- Keep open communication among this workforce, ensuring they are supported and healthy.
- Be mindful that work is also key for social engagement for many, and keeping connected to other community members. Try to arrange group teleconferences
- Consider adjusting their tasks to minimise client contact

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There are several options that employees may face:

1. Employee may be instructed to self-isolate by their doctor or the government, which would constitute leave without pay (LWOP).
2. Employee has decided to self-isolate, continues leave without pay.
3. Employer has instructed an employee to self-isolate, which would constitute leave with pay.
4. Suitable alternative employment or ability to work from home is available, no changes to their pay
5. Suitable alternative employment or ability to work from home is available on reduced hours, employee's salary will be reduced to the number of hours worked.

For Employees who are instructed to self-isolate will be able to apply for 2 weeks newly introduced unpaid Pandemic Leave. Otherwise, are eligible to take their annual leave at half their rate of pay. Please see VACCHO's Variation to Awards (including Pandemic Leave and Annual Leave Flexibility TipSheet).

Scenarios:

- 1) An Aboriginal employee who is over 50 years and has Type 2 diabetes. She works as a Receptionist and comes into contact with a lot of clients, so is worried about contracting COVID-19. She speaks with her Manager, and says she would prefer to self-isolate. They agree for her to go on Leave Without Pay.
- 2) An Aboriginal employee is living with a chronic illness and has been instructed to self-isolate by his doctor. He is enquiring what leave and provisions he is entitled to during isolation. He has one week of Annual Leave to access, but no other entitlements. This employee has a few options available to them:
 - a) Utilises new Annual Leave at half pay arrangement and uses his one week to cover off the two weeks, ie his weekly salary is halved to cover the two weeks
 - b) Takes one week of Annual Leave, and then moves onto Pandemic Leave, which is unpaid leave.
 - c) The employer and employee enter into agreement allowing the employee to take an extra week's annual leave in advance
- 3) A 58 year-old Aboriginal employee with a declared chronic illness is working in a frontline position at the Health Centre. They are happy to keep working. The Practice Manager, considering the strong advice from Government decides the employee's wellbeing is paramount and directs them to self-isolate. The Manager delegates other organisational tasks and this employee goes on Leave with Pay.
- 4) A 60 year-old Aboriginal employee is working in accountsbut does not have face to face contact with community speaks to her manager about her concerns. The organisation completes a risk assessment and decides her role is one that can be worked from home and for her to attend the workplace one half days a week. In this case the employee maintains her salary and leave entitlements.

Redeployment options:

Consider whether there are other roles or additional tasks that employees over 50 years of age could do.

Is there another role in the office that doesn't have face-to-face contact with clients?

Is there any general administrative tasks they could assist with? Maybe in another team?

Are there any procedural documents or manuals that you haven't had time to get onto before this, that you could catch up on?