



Australian workplaces adopt physical distancing but few other Covid-19 safety measures, poll finds

Hygiene measures, pandemic leave and a plan to respond to positive cases are rare, UComms poll of workers finds

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The majority of employers have implemented physical distancing practices but further steps to make workplaces safe against Covid-19 such as hygiene measures, pandemic leave and a plan to respond to positive cases are rare.

Those are the findings of a UComms poll of a representative sample of 1,367 workers for the Australian Council of Trade Unions, which paints a bleak picture of workplaces' preparedness as Covid-19 restrictions are eased Australia-wide.

The ACTU is campaigning for paid pandemic leave to allow testing and recovery of sick workers, warning Australia is not ready to go back to work because one in three people do not have access to

paid sick leave.

The peak union body cites workplace clusters such as the Newmarch House aged care facility in Sydney and Cedar Meats in Melbourne as evidence of the need for a new temporary leave right.

The poll found that 70% of workers still in their workplaces reported their employer had adopted social distancing measures. Other measures were much rarer, such as: additional hygiene measures including access to soap and sanitiser (11%), a plan to respond to staff with symptoms (9%), extra workplace cleaning (4%) and paid pandemic leave (1%).

Results were similar for workers currently working from home, although they reported lower rates of social distancing (59%) and higher rates of flexibility to continue working from home, 25% compared with 5% for those still attending their workplace.

Some 95% of workers said they would previously have considered attending work despite mild respiratory symptoms.

But Covid-19 has given workers pause, with 85% saying the pandemic has made them reconsider. Only 10% of workers said they would choose to go to work regardless of having respiratory issues that might indicate a Covid-19 infection.

They are more likely to be male, younger and on the lowest incomes, earning less than \$31,200 a year.

The ACTU secretary, Sally McManus, told Guardian Australia it was a great concern that most employers had not discussed with employees how Covid-19 prevention measures are going to work in their workplace.

“It’s a human transmitted virus,” she said. “Plans for a safe workplace can’t be in an employer’s heads but not embraced by the workers because they’re the ones that will have to implement them for other workers and customers.”

McManus said pandemic leave should be mandatory, and the government should step in and pay if the cost were considered too great for small business.

“We know if we just leave it to a laissez faire approach, for people to one by one decide whether to offer paid pandemic leave or not, because someone is not going to.

“If someone turns up sick and spreads the virus, then it’s not just the one company, or those workers affected, it’s the whole community. That’s why we need a universal and uniform solution.”

On Thursday the federal government rolled out a series of new advertisements encouraging people to “do the three to stay Covid free” by practising physical distancing, good hygiene and using the CovidSafe app.

Despite problems using data, the deputy chief medical officer, Nick Coatsworth, said the app is “already being used by state health workers to quickly find people exposed to the virus”.

“The achievement and commitment of Australians in helping to fight Covid-19 and to flatten the coronavirus curve have been magnificent,” he said.

“But our work is not finished ... We need everyone to stay focused on the things we need to do to protect ourselves and others as we find our ‘new normal’.”

Americans have had enough ...

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