
— **Opinion**

Help for aged care workers may not be so helpful

New minimum two-hour shifts are likely to blow home care package budgets and could push some people to residential aged care earlier than planned.

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Home care package [<https://www.afr.com/wealth/personal-finance/vital-to-know-the-true-cost-of-aged-care-at-home-20220110-p59n92>] budgets are already limited in how much help at home a person can receive. The soon-to-be-introduced minimum two-hour shifts for casual and part-time workers could have a negative impact.

With a shortage of care workers and a reluctance to pay for additional home care privately, it's possible the move could push some people to residential aged care [<https://www.afr.com/wealth/personal-finance/couples-entering-aged-care-need-to-consider-timing-20220502-p5ahul>] earlier than planned.



Employers will also have to pay their employees a new broken shift allowance where their hours are spread across a day.

Anna Anderson is not alone in her need for someone to visit each morning to help her shower, dress and take her medication. On a good day, the worker, employed as a casual with an approved home care provider, spends an hour with Anna before attending to another client, James Peel, for a half-hour visit.

A worker from the same provider returns at the end of the day to assist Anna with her medication, which generally takes about 15 minutes, before visiting James to assist with his evening meal, which might take an hour.

The schedule for both these clients has been carefully worked out by the provider to ensure that the help they need fits within their limited level two home care package budgets of about \$16,000 a year each.

A provider charging \$60 an hour to deliver weekday services is just able to make a daily one-hour visit fit within the level two budget, which generally has to also cover a case management and administration fee.

With good rostering and some creativity, a provider can make it work – usually because casual and part-time workers are paid only a minimum one hour and no compensation for the time between shifts.

There is more flexibility with the higher-level packages of up to \$52,000 a year, but then the client's needs can be considerably more and the finite funds just as hard to manage if someone is to remain living independently in their own home.

Rosters tricky

From July 1, rostering could get a lot more difficult as employers adopt a Fair Work Commission minimum payment of two hours for casual and part-time home care employees.

Employers will also have to pay their employees a new broken shift allowance where their hours are spread across a day.

It could mean more unwanted help or less needed help, depending on how a worker's shift is structured.

While it doesn't stop an employee working for one or more clients during the minimum payment period of two hours, someone has to pay for the broken shift allowance where it applies if the two-hour minimum isn't met.

Using the previous example, will the extra half hour in the morning come from Anna's package or that of James?

The worker could be rostered on for an extra hour for Anna, but what if she doesn't want – or can't afford – someone in her house for two hours?

Will the broken shift allowance of \$17.53 be covered by the provider or split between Anna and James?

It's hard to see how the additional costs won't be passed on to the 200,000 or so recipients of a home care package.

Whether the changes to the Social and Community Services Award have the predicted positive impact on workers also remains to be seen.

It makes sense for support workers to have more time with the client and to assist with other tasks around the home – medication prompting, preparing a meal, bed linen changes, washing and tidying up. Generally, it takes two hours with a shower, says Danielle Robertson, director of DR Care Solutions.

Pressure on families

The concern for clients is that there is no further funding for home care packages in the pipeline. So the added hour will mean family (informal carers) pick up the

extra shift at the end of the day, or the family or individual pays “fee for service” for the extra visit, she says.

Robertson says it will put pressure on the client. Those on pensions should receive extra funding and those who can afford it should be paying for the extra shift, she adds.

Home care agencies are reporting that some families have already worked out that their loved one will be better off financially in a residential home. This is an unfortunate outcome, says Robertson.

Hopefully, the change in minimum hours does advantage workers, says Paul Sadler, chief executive of peak body Aged & Community Services Australia.

However, it’s not necessarily in the interest of all workers and there is an impact on consumers, he says.

At a time when workers are already in short supply, the minimum two-hour shift could make it tougher for people to get the help they need.

The previous government’s one-off \$800 payment, which is yet to get to most of the eligible workers, was clearly a gimmick.

Sadler believes it could make engagement by “Uber-like” platforms more attractive for some workers. Care workers engaged through online platforms such as mable.com.au can negotiate directly with people seeking carers on the hours they work and the rate.

Self-managing a home package using workers via online platforms is not for everyone, but anecdotally, it is gaining traction as people needing support look for the most cost-effective way to get the help they need.

By saving the case management fee charged by providers, they can effectively “buy” more hours. If they can find workers willing to do just the half-hour or one hour they need, then they are already better off than with the new two-hour minimum. Workers win because they get to work the hours that suit them and charge accordingly.



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Looking after existing aged care workers and finding ways to attract new ones has become paramount to building a workforce sufficient to look after the ageing population.

The previous government's one-off \$800 payment, which is yet to get to most of the eligible workers, was clearly a gimmick.

The best hope is for the Fair Work Commission to accept the call for a 25 per cent wage increase for all aged care workers, which will hopefully incentivise more people to join the sector.

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