



**Submission to the Health, Communities,
Disability Services and Domestic and Family
Violence Prevention Committee:**

***Inquiry into the Queensland Government's
health response to COVID-19***

Introduction

United Workers Union¹ makes this submission to the Health, Communities, Disability Services and Domestic and Family Violence Prevention Committee regarding the *Inquiry into the Queensland Government's health response to COVID-19* (the Inquiry).

Overview of United Workers Union

United Workers Union represents almost 30,000 workers in Queensland across a range of public and private sector employers who are engaged in a diverse range of industries and occupations, and who remain under both the State and Federal industrial relations jurisdiction.

Our membership includes ambulance officers, health professionals and operational staff, school cleaners, teacher aides, early childhood educators, those employed in the contracting industries, including but not limited to cleaning, security and hospitality, private prisons and detention centres, aged care workers, logistics and supply chain and farm workers.

United Workers Union has a long and proud history of advocating for and representing the industrial interests of our members whom are employed in a myriad of industries including those which remained on the frontline of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Covid-19 Pandemic

The Covid-19 Pandemic represents a public health emergency which is unprecedented in modern times. All reasonable models predicted significant surge on hospital admissions, and in particular tests to the limits of intensive care capacity from the Covid-19 Pandemic.

Queensland's response to Covid-19

Within Queensland's health care system, United Workers Union represents the interests of Queensland Ambulance Service (QAS) Officers and various frontline Operational and Health Practitioner roles.

QAS

Longstanding constructive relations between United Workers Union and the QAS ensured that employees were well placed to respond to the Covid-19 Pandemic in a prompt and effective manner, whilst ensuring the highest level of consultation between relevant stakeholders. United Workers Union members were involved in on-road, planning and oversight responses to the

¹ United Voice, Industrial Union of Employees, Queensland is now known as United Workers Union.

Covid-19 Pandemic. Commencing in late January 2020, QAS enacted a Pandemic plan and the State Incident Management Room was constituted.

QAS was also represented on the State Health Emergency Co-ordination Centre and the State Disaster Coordination Group which ensured that QAS employees were provided with up-to-date developments on the Pandemic in a prompt and effective manner.

On a practical level, operators in the Operations Centre responsible for taking Triple-Zero calls implemented targeted questioning and interrogation of callers.

On-road paramedics increased their safety awareness and ensured appropriate usage of personal protective equipment when dealing with suspected Covid-19 patients. Paramedics also ensured appropriate surveillance of identified Covid-19 trends within their specific communities. On-road crews were aligned to ensure an appropriate mix of skills and experience to deal with potential Covid-19 cases.

All relevant QAS employees were provided with flu vaccinations. Ongoing screening of health and wellbeing of QAS employees continues, as well as welfare management of vulnerable members of the QAS cohort.

Operational employees and Health Practitioners

The constructive relationship between United Workers Union and Queensland Health ensured a collaborative approach to responding to the Pandemic.

The decentralised nature of Queensland's Hospital and Health Service Network required the creation and implementation of consistent principles in a rapid and effective manner. Commencing from the earliest developments in the Pandemic, United Workers Union was involved in planning with Queensland Health and Hospital and Health Services to identify opportunities for collaboration. United Workers Union is satisfied with the approach that was implemented, which included a framework for local level consultation, under central direction and oversight, with escalation mechanisms for dispute resolution.

Through the course of consultation, Queensland Health recognised the value that Unions brought through utilisation of existing communication channels, thereby ensuring consistency of messaging across the workforce and enabling rapid and widespread feedback from relevant frontline workers. The consultation and communication model adopted in partnership with Unions and the workforce during the COVID-19 response demonstrated an efficient, robust and effective model for negotiating change and for overseeing the implementation of that change.

An important early step which was taken by Queensland Health was the commitment to ensuring that workers (including casuals) would be paid to stay away from work in the event that they were

unwell. This ensured that all employees were able to comply with the advice of the Chief Health Officer without any financial impediments.

Employees who were identified as being vulnerable to the Covid-19 disease were accommodated with alternative working arrangements, which may have included working from home, or performance of work in lower risk workplaces.

These commitments and steps with respect to employee entitlements and vulnerable employees played a part in ensuring that the highest standards of safety for both staff and patients were observed in hospital and health services.

The health response to the Covid-19 Pandemic demonstrates a model of how a consistent and consultative approach can be adopted by employer and employee representatives, whilst still ensuring agility and flexibility to emerging issues.

Conclusion

The health care response to Covid-19 in Queensland is commendable. United Workers Union commends the Queensland Government for its consultative approach with employees and their representatives to ensure a rapid and best practice response to the Pandemic.