

COVID-19 WAGE SUBSIDY PACKAGE

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ABOUT CARE

The Centre for Culture-Centred Approach to Research and Evaluation (CARE) at Massey University, Aotearoa New Zealand, is a global hub for communication research that uses participatory and culture-centred methodologies to develop community-driven communication solutions to health and wellbeing. Through experiments in methods of radical democracy anchored in community ownership and community voice, the Centre collaborates with communities, community organisers, community researchers, advocates and activists to imagine and develop sustainable practices for prevention, health care organising, food and agriculture, worker organising, migrant and refugee rights, indigenous rights, rights of the poor and economic transformation.

Prof Mohan J Dutta is the Director of CARE and author of books such as *Neoliberal Health Organizing*, *Communicating Health*, and *Voices of Resistance*.

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**CHRISTINE ELERS (NGĀ HAU)
CARE, MASSEY UNIVERSITY**

INTRODUCTION

We are writing about the government's COVID-19 wage subsidy package, in particular:

1. The sick leave payment due to be folded into the modified COVID-19 wage subsidy package; and
2. The online publications outlining the names of all employers who have received the COVID-19 wage subsidy package.

1. THE SICK LEAVE PAYMENT DUE TO BE FOLDED INTO THE MODIFIED COVID-19 WAGE SUBSIDY PACKAGE

On Wednesday 25 March 2020, both Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern and Finance Minister Grant Robertson announced that further guidelines would be incorporated into the COVID-19 sick leave payments with a focus on essential workers, who have underlying health conditions. Continuing to work in the current COVID-19 crisis would expose these workers to a high risk of exposure.

It has been five days since lockdown. In this timeframe, community essential workers have been working hard to ensure that all communities can access essential supplies and services. Based on our ongoing advocacy work with community members, our research team defined as essential supplies and services.

Key points:

- a) There are vulnerable, essential workers that are still working during the current crisis. Some have little or no annual and/or sick leave entitlements. We are asking if the government can please release the details of the new sick leave provisions forthwith to enable our essential vulnerable workers, through their employers, to apply for sick leave.
- b) If medical certificates are required, it can take a few days for this to be arranged.
- c) If medical centres require their enrolled patient to make an appointment with their GP to be re-assessed before issuing a medical certificate, then our essential, vulnerable workers may need to take time off work (leave they may not have) to arrange an appointment with their GP.
- d) GP appointments in some areas are also difficult to get at this time.
- e) The cost of GP appointments can be an additional barrier for marginalized communities.
- f) Some unions are inundated with similar and other employment related requests.
- g) Removing or reducing as many barriers as possible for our communities' essential, vulnerable workers to gain access to sick leave entitlements would not only be in their health and wellbeing, but also in the interests of their whānau and community.

2. THE ONLINE PUBLICATION OUTLINING THE NAMES OF ALL EMPLOYERS WHO HAVE RECEIVED THE COVID-19 WAGE SUBSIDY PACKAGE

On Friday 27th March 2020 both Ministers announced that a list of employers who have received the covid-19 wage subsidy package would be published, “as indicated to them, when they applied for the subsidy.”

Key points:

- a) There are employees who have been asked by their employers to take their own annual leave or sick leave during this lockdown period.
- b) In the communities where CARE does our work, these employees have been searching online for the publicised list of employers who received the COVID-19 wage subsidy package.
- c) This information is vital as a leverage for employees to compel their employers to utilise the wage subsidy for the correct purpose, that is paying their staff to keep them employed during lockdown, whereby minimising the strain on our social services.
- d) If an employer has applied for this wage subsidy for specific employees (we understand that this is an application requirement), then the employer makes some but not all of its employees redundant, will the subsidy for the redundant employees be refunded back to the government or can those subsidies be applied by the employer to other employees, already receiving a wage subsidy to further top up their salary?
- e) Can an employer use the subsidy for an employee as part of their redundancy package for example to pay out a notice of termination period?

Releasing the online publication of the list of employers who have received the wage subsidy package would support essential workers and provide clarity for non-essential workers who maybe navigating the terrains of employment relations to remain in the workforce. Moreover, updating the government COVID-19 wage subsidy list daily would empower workers to negotiate their rights at the workplace while carrying out their important work.