

Working time & pay in home-based disability support work in the NDIS

Disability support workers provide care and support to people with a disability needing help with daily living and/or social and community participation. They work in people's private homes, in the community and in residential settings, such as group homes. Their work can involve personal care, household assistance, and support with social and community participation. Women make up 70% of the disability support workforce in Australia and 34% of are aged over 45.

Low pay and undervaluation of work are problems for disability workers in Australia, as is the case for care workers internationally. In comparison to workers in male-dominated jobs requiring similar levels of skills, wages are low for the mostly female disability support workforce. In 2020 the [SCHADS Award wage](#) paid to disability workers supporting people in their homes started at \$21.20 and could be up to \$29.05, depending on whether the worker is classified as an 'attendant care worker' or a support worker. The [National Minimum Wage](#) is \$19.49 per hour.

Irregular, fragmented and short hours' working time patterns contribute to insecurity in work, work-life problems and low pay for disability support workers who provide support to people in private homes and the community. Most support workers (60%) work part-time hours, averaging 21 hrs a week, and almost half (46%) are in casual jobs, up from 40% in 2015 (NDS 2018). Disability support workers have high levels of multiple job-holding.

Pay and working time: our research findings

In our study, if unpaid overtime and time spent travelling directly between clients had been paid, workers would have received between 2% and 27% more for their 3 days' work.

Systematic and regular underpayment for work: We identified two types of unpaid work as contributing to underpayments of wages for time worked: 1) unpaid overtime and 2) unpaid travel between work sites.

Unpaid travel: In a single day, workers provide support to multiple people, often travelling directly from one private home to another to do so. Many workers in our study were not paid for this time.

Unpaid overtime: With short paid shifts, work regularly spills over into unpaid time. Unpaid time is spent on essential support, client requests, family communication, communication with supervisors and paperwork.

Time out of life: Workers' days typically comprised several short paid 'shifts', interspersed with often long periods of unpaid time. The women worked long days and up to 6 or 7 days a week for part-time hours. In each working day there is unpaid 'dead' time between paid shifts. This time is not considered 'productive' work time but is nonetheless structured by working time and unavailable as personal time. These arrangements left workers exhausted and with little time for friends and families.

'A Day in the Life of a Care and Support Worker'

About the research: Ten support workers each kept a diary of 3 working days, detailing time spent in work activities and breaks in between. We interviewed workers before and after the 3 days to learn more about their jobs and how spent their time.



Watch the short 'Day in the Life' Wage Theft video [here](#)

How do underpayment and 'time out of life' occur?

NDIS funding is set too low, allowing insufficient or no time for communication with supervisors, handover to peers, essential documentation or flexibility to respond to care contingencies.

Gaps in employment regulation include no specific provision in the SCHADS Award for paid travel time directly from one work site to another. The Award allows 1-hour minimum engagements for casual homecare workers and enables the same for part-time disability support workers.

Organisational strategies establish work arrangements that leave workers absorbing the costs of unpaid work tasks. Employers exploit the lack of clear minimum standards relating to travel time.

Strategies for decent work for disability support workers

The NDIS

Establish a comprehensive workforce strategy recognising a skilled workforce in secure work as the basis for quality and safety.

Embed accountability for labour standards in NDIS policy and regulation.

Re-design the NDIS pricing model to enable high-performance work practice, including provision for training and development.

Employment regulation

Address deficiencies in employment minimum standards in the SCHADS Award such as low/nil minimum engagement and unpaid travel time.

Embed gender equality objectives in award review processes.

Strengthening labour regulations and safety nets to close gaps that leave 'non-standard' workers, including casuals, without adequate protections in precarious work arrangements.

Employer strategies

Pay workers for overtime and for travel between clients.

Adopt team-based support approaches based on skilled work.

Provide regular and predictable hours to part-time employees, gaining flexibility through innovative strategies that do not devolve business risks to support workers.

For more information see: [Macdonald, F, Bentham, E & Malone, J \(2018\) Wage, theft, underpayment and unpaid work in marketised social care, *Economic and Labour Relations Review* 29\(1\): 80-96.](#)

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The National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) is an individualised funding scheme for disability services. It aims to empower people as consumers by providing them with funding to buy their supports from their preferred provider on the market. The NDIA sets price limits and funds services according to these prices. Personal support is an hourly price that is supposed to cover wages, labour on-costs and other overheads.

References and further reading

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