FOR MANAGERS AND WORKERS

COVID-19 has changed the way we work and live. This is a particularly challenging time for call centres, help desks and contact centres. An average day can include working longer hours to meet increased call volumes, managing complex issues and complaints, and in some cases, experiencing public distress, aggression or abuse.

Thousands of Australians continue to turn to the government and leading organisations for advice and assistance. As managers and workers answer calls for help, they need practical guidance to help them stay safe and support their wellbeing.

Practical tips for managers

- **Keep teams informed about workplace health and safety.** Every employer should have clear WHS procedures, processes and systems in place, which is particularly important when there are changes in job design and workplace environment. Ongoing conversations between managers and workers can help resolve misunderstandings and support psychological safety.

- **Have regular meetings or stand-ups.** As the COVID-19 situation evolves, there can be shifts in direction or policy on a daily or hourly basis. Share relevant updates with your team, and brainstorm new approaches to common complaints or complex issues.

- **Ensure workers take scheduled breaks.** During peak periods, it is important to ensure your workers continue to take their breaks and do not work through them to meet increased call volumes.

- **Inform teams about policies and procedures for abusive calls.** For example, managers can provide support during the call, workers can escalate the call to a manager and/or have time to debrief and recover away from the general work area. Remind workers that it's not personal - people are experiencing increased anxiety, frustration and anger during COVID-19.

- **Keep your communications team updated.** If there are changes to call waiting times, volumes or emerging issues, your communications team can help translate or simplify customer messaging quickly and more broadly when needed.

- **Discuss support options when needed.** COVID-19 is a difficult time. If a worker needs extra support, talk to them about the assistance programs and confidential counselling services available (some options are listed below).

Support services

Talk with your manager about your employee assistance program (EAP), or a trusted friend, counsellor or psychologist. You can also seek help from Beyond Blue 1800 512 348 or Lifeline on 13 11 14.

Practical tips for workers

- **Be informed.** Make sure you source your information from official websites including australia.gov.au, health.gov.au, apsc.gov.au and trusted national, State or Territory Government social media channels.

- **Remain calm and understanding.** It may cause you some distress when customers are overwhelmed, abusive or aggressive. If you are unable to address the cause of this behaviour – such as long wait times or inaccurate or misleading information – talk with your manager about options for resolving their query.

- **Familiarise yourself with escalation policies and procedures.** When callers are abusive, seek guidance or escalate the call to your manager. There are processes and procedures in place for these situations, including suspending the call or reporting to the police when necessary.

- **Ask for help if you need it.** Be kind to yourself and the people working around you. Look after your mental health and wellbeing by taking scheduled breaks and remember to reach out for support – if you're not comfortable talking to your manager, talk to a friend, colleague and professional support if required.

Working from home or remotely presents new challenges for call centre managers and workers. Regular communication and staying connected are critical to supporting teams and safe work.

- Managers need to check in with workers each day to discuss emerging issues and important procedures, such as the escalation process to follow after an abusive or aggressive call.

- Workers can set reminders to ensure they take scheduled breaks and complete reviews of their remote working arrangements on a regular basis.

Cleaning and hygiene

Call centres often employ large numbers of workers and/or have multiple shifts where teams share furniture and equipment that can harbour germs and bacteria.

Working together, managers and workers can help maintain a high standard of hygiene to prevent the spread of germs (such as the virus that causes COVID-19). Regularly cleaning the following workplace items is a good start:

- Workstations—keyboard, telephone, desk and chair
- Individual headsets
- Rest areas – where workers are encouraged to eat away from their workstations
- Kitchen and amenities room
- Photocopier and printing equipment

For more information

- Call Centres: A guide to safe work available on the Comcare website
- Australian Government for official COVID-19 updates and advice
- Physical Distancing and Good Hygiene Checklist available from Safe Work Australia.