

The Sydney Morning Herald

Exclusive Politics Federal Aged care

Aged care still waiting for ADF support as homes close amid staff shortages



By Dana Daniel

February 16, 2022 – 5.00am

For our free coronavirus pandemic coverage, [learn more here.](#)

Hundreds of aged care homes are yet to receive information on how to apply for Australian Defence Force help as staff shortages in the sector due to Omicron push some operators to close their doors.

More than a week after Prime Minister Scott Morrison announced that up to 1700 ADF personnel would be sent to help fill clinical and support roles in aged care homes, only a handful of the nation's more than 2600 facilities have received military assistance.



Some aged care providers are closing their doors as staff shortages worsen. LOUISE KENNERLEY

Official ADF data shows there were just 129 personnel on the ground helping fill staff shortages in the sector on Tuesday, including 18 in NSW and 50 in Victoria.

Sources within the sector who asked not to be named said many aged care operators had not been told how to apply for ADF workforce support while a Defence spokesperson said requests for help were being funnelled through the Health Department.

Mr Morrison earlier this month said the initial ADF teams would be deployed to facilities in “extreme situations” due to Omicron but noted they could not fill all the gaps. The sector estimates thousands of staff are currently unavailable due to Omicron.

Any additional help will be too late for a number of homes, with Lark Ellen Aged Care near Mr Morrison’s electorate in Sydney’s Sutherland Shire ceasing operations by the end of March after struggling with staffing shortages. Two other homes in rural NSW will tell residents on Wednesday that ongoing staffing shortages have forced a decision to close. The *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Age* have agreed not to name the homes until residents have been informed.

The latest closures will bring the number of aged care homes to shut since December 1 to nine.

Aged and Community Services of Australia chief executive Paul Sadler said Omicron staff shortages had escalated home closures at a time when the sector was already struggling.

“What we have is an underfunded system,” Mr Sadler said.

“We’ve seen recent closures. It’s a coming together of those long-term, really unresolved financial issues for the sector with the short-term impact of staffing shortages, and it’s triggering some providers to say, ‘well, this home is really not viable to continue to operate’.”

Grant Corderoy, a senior partner specialising in aged care at accounting firm StewartBrown, said Omicron had hit the aged care sector harder than any other industry. He expected the number of homes operating at a loss to hit 60 per cent by June, up from 56 per cent in the September quarter.

“Regional homes are really struggling,” Mr Corderoy said.

Aged care home closures are a drastic step that require operators to find somewhere for residents to live as they are bound by contracts that lock in security of tenure.

While existing issues in the sector were driving closures before the coronavirus pandemic, Mr Corderoy said the recent Omicron wave had exacerbated the crisis.

Unions are pushing for a 25 per cent pay rise for aged care workers in the Fair Work Commission.

Opposition aged care spokesperson Clare O’Neil said aged care was in a state of crisis and the government was “utterly out of touch with what is really going on out there”.

“The denials, the neglect and incompetency has to end,” Ms O’Neil said.

During parliamentary question time on Tuesday, Mr Morrison said the government was pursuing “systemic reform” and that its recently announced two \$400 bonus payments being provided to workers brought retention payments to \$600 million.

“Although it has been difficult, we see one of the lowest rates of loss of life in the world in aged care and we thank our staff and honour them for that,” the Prime Minister said.

Fascinating answers to perplexing questions delivered to your inbox every week. Sign up to get our new Explainer newsletter here.



Dana Daniel is a federal health reporter for The Sydney Morning Herald and The Age in Canberra. Connect via [Twitter](#) or [email](#).
