

Overview of findings from the Victorian COVID-19 carer survey

MARCH 2022

In December 2021, Carers Victoria invited carers from across the state to participate in a survey to seek information about how they had been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

This occurred at a time when Victoria was preparing to transition to COVID normal after multiple lockdowns, and we wanted to understand how the pandemic had impacted carers, how they were feeling as the state entered this transition, and what they most needed to rebuild to COVID normal.

In total, 1,113 carers completed the survey over December 2021.

- › Respondents from age 10 to over 90 years participated, 87% of whom identified as female.
- › 68% lived in metropolitan and 32% in regional Victoria.
- › 31% cared for a person with disability, 21% for an older person with care needs, 25% for a person living with mental illness, 23% cared for a person living with chronic illness¹.
- › 25% had been in care roles for over 20 years; 29% for 11-20 years; <1% for less than a year, with 4% of respondents indicating they entered a care relationship because of the pandemic.

Five high level themes have emerged from initial analysis of survey results:

1. Carer mental health and wellbeing has suffered.
2. Many carers had to provide complex care that would usually be provided by trained professionals.
3. The impacts of caring roles on employment was evident, with many carers changing their employment arrangements to accommodate their caring role and 1 in 8 leaving work as a result.
4. Carers need support to reconnect in a COVID normal Victoria.
5. Carers are keen to see some of the innovations introduced during the pandemic maintained.

This document provides additional details regarding each of these themes.

The Carers Victoria Knowledge Centre will be releasing further analysis and data over coming months: visit www.carersvictoria.org.au/KnowledgeCentre to access future releases.

¹ Some care recipients had multiple needs, hence this adds up to over 100%.

Carers' mental health and wellbeing

HEADLINE FINDINGS

- › The mental health and wellbeing of carers was significantly impacted by the pandemic.
- › 76% of carers reporting increased levels of loneliness, substantially above the 54% rate reported for the general population.
- › 80% of respondents indicated their mental health had worsened since the pandemic started.

KEY DATA

More than 4 in 5 carers (85%) who responded felt socially isolated, and 3 out 4 (75%) felt lonely more often compared to pre-pandemic times.

Those caring for 11 years or more were much more likely to report feeling isolated compared to those caring for 1-2 years (87+% cf 75%).

Forty five percent of carers indicated their levels of resilience were worse or a lot worse since the COVID-19 pandemic. For these results, there were notable differences between different age cohorts:

- › Those aged 20-29 and 40-49 were significantly more likely to report better resilience since the COVID-19 pandemic
- › those aged 70-79 were significantly less likely to report better resilience.

More than half (51%) of carers indicated that their mental health was worse or a lot worse. The results varied according to factors such as duration of care relationship, and geographic location. For example:

- › Those caring for 11-20 years were significantly more likely to report better mental health, while those caring for 2-5 years were significantly less likely to report better mental health.

Carers located in Melbourne were significantly more likely to report a worse impact on mental health compared to regional Victorian located carers.

Carers responding to the survey also provided some clear direction about what extra mental health and wellbeing supports they needed, identifying group activities and psychological support services as priorities.

Many carers had to provide complex care

HEADLINE FINDINGS

- › Over 80% of carers reported they spent more time in their care roles over the pandemic.
- › Over 50% of carers were providing complex care that would usually be provided by trained professionals – highlighting the critical role they play in supplementing the funded service system.

More than 4 in 5 carers responding to the survey spent more time in their care roles during the COVID-19 pandemic.

There were some variations noted between carers, depending on their age and also the duration of their care relationship. For example:

- › Only 58% of those in the 80-85 year age group, indicated that they spent more time in their carer role during the COVID-19 pandemic. This was statistically significant compared to all other age groups, except those aged 90+.
- › Those caring for more than 2 years were significantly more likely to report spending more time in the carer role compared to those caring for 1-2 years.

Just over half of carers (52%) provided care usually given by a medical or allied health professional during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This fits with other data collected through the survey, which indicated that carers experienced challenges accessing general practitioners, respite and psychological services. For example:

- › For those carers who access respite, almost half (49%) indicated that these needs increased since the COVID-19 pandemic began. Those caring less than 1 year, were significantly less likely to say respite needs had increased. Typical barriers to accessing respite included: the person declining formal support and the services not being available.
- › More than half of carers (51%) who responded indicated that they had access to services needed during the COVID-19 pandemic, while 30% said they didn't. Those in Regional Victoria were significantly more likely to report being able to access the services needed during the COVID-19 lockdowns. The most difficult services to access were GP, respite and psychological services.

Carer employment and training

HEADLINE FINDINGS

- › 47% of all carers changed their employment arrangements to accommodate their care relationships during the pandemic.
- › 12 % of carers resigned or retired to do so.

KEY DATA

47% of carers had to make some change to their employment because of the COVID-19 pandemic, including

- › 16% had to reduce their hours or take additional leave.
- › 8% either resigned from their job or retired early.
- › 5% accepted another role with greater flexibility.

These figures varied between carers who were relatively new to their caring role and those who had been caring for longer than one year. For example, a larger proportion of those carers with those with less than a year in a caring role resigned or took leave when compared to more experienced carers.

Almost a third (30%) of carers had reduced income during the COVID-19 pandemic. Carers with increased expenses indicated that they spent more on groceries, utilities and health.

Carers are keen to see some of the innovations introduced during the pandemic maintained

HEADLINE FINDINGS

- › Telehealth was the particularly popular among respondents.
- › 64% of carers wanted Medicare funded telehealth consultations retained as these provided them with greater flexibility and saved on the time and expense of travel.

Substantial changes occurred to service delivery and safeguarding during the course of the pandemic.

Carers reported the main benefits from system changes due to COVID-19 restrictions were in the areas of:

- › GP telehealth (64%);
- › vaccine mandates for support workers (34%);
- › and allied health telehealth (33%).

The most accessed online services by carers during the COVID-19 pandemic were:

- › mental health services (45%);
- › physical health services (44%);
- › information/communication (39%);
- › carer support groups (32%).

Carers need support to re-connect in a COVID normal Victoria

HEADLINE FINDINGS

- › Access to respite was a key ask among respondents.
- › 72% of respondents indicated they would self impose restrictions on their activities and engagement.

KEY DATA

What carers most wanted as they prepared to transition to COVID normal is better access to supports for the people they care for. Of the 80% of respondents who accessed respite indicated their need for these had increased but also reported it was the service most difficult to access

The survey was conducted before the Omicron variant was prevalent in the community and even at that time, carers were nervous about re-entering a COVID normal community. Of the survey respondents, 72% indicated they would self impose restrictions on their activities and engagement.

Carers responding to the survey also identified support to gain employment as another priority. 9% of carers wanted help finding paid employment.

Other potential supports carers nominated that could assist in a COVID normal Victoria included:

- › Increased availability of health services including group activities;
- › Financial support (for example, an increase in the carers allowance);
- › Uber or taxi vouchers to attend health appointments;
- › Carer support group or outings;
- › Easy access to services to help around the home (for example, assistance with cleaning, cooking);
- › Psychological support for carers.