

Keep the economy open by keeping people out of hospital

Business groups and unions call for government for rapid antigen testing for SMEs

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An alliance of peak bodies and unions, representing Australian businesses and workers from industries suffering the highest levels of risk and disruption has been formed. We are calling for state and federal governments to fund a program for small to medium sized enterprises (SMEs) to purchase rapid antigen tests for their staff.

A funding mechanism for rapid antigen testing could boost business confidence for struggling industries, protect supply chains already under severe pressure and help maintain high testing numbers as more Australians become fully vaccinated.

As large sections of the Australian community move to a new phase of living with the virus, it will be critical to keep workplaces safe and small businesses open and avoiding unnecessary snap closures as they rebuild.

Many instances of community transmission of COVID-19 happen at SMEs, posing a risk to the health of workers, customers, and the small business owner.

Employers have a duty under Work Health and Safety laws to eliminate and minimise the risk of exposure to COVID-19 as far as is reasonably practicable.

High vaccination levels are key to managing this risk, reducing exposure, and getting closer to normality; however, we know that vaccinated people are still able to contract and transmit COVID-19 and we must take additional steps to prevent transmission in the workplace and support small businesses to stay open. With public health restrictions being eased and borders coming down we know, based on modelling, that infections are going to rise.

Rapid antigen tests (RATs) are an essential tool for workplaces to identify COVID-19 before it enters the workplace. With a clear, national, standardised approach, and the necessary financial support for workers who test positive, RATs will keep workers safe, break chains of transmission and help small businesses open.

Pathology Technology Australia modelling suggests the cost of supervised rapid antigen testing will be between \$18-49 per test, while unsupervised testing could cost \$20 per test, both depending on quantities purchased.

For effective use of rapid antigen tests, studies suggest they must be performed at least every three days. Repeat testing two to three times per week has proven to be as accurate as PCR testing but represents a substantial cost for SMEs to swallow and would likely disincentivise people to continue testing, even in high-risk settings.

The transport industry is also facing a supply chain nightmare with strict and disparate border testing mandates causing angst and financial burdens across the industry.

Small businesses and workers hope the need for hard lockdowns will be consigned to history, however the risk of overstretched hospitals and returning restrictions is real. Should a state have to reimpose restrictions again in the future, the cost to the economy would be devastating.

We urgently call on the federal and state governments to work with small business groups, unions and the transport industry to fund rapid antigen tests for small businesses.

Other parts of the world including the UK, Singapore, and a number of countries in Europe are funding these tests to help with their responses to COVID. We cannot afford to be at the back of the queue; we must be preventive and not reactive.

COSBOA CEO Alexi Boyd said “If rapid antigen testing is cost prohibitive, small businesses just won’t use it. Providing funding to access these tests will give small business people confidence that they can stay open while still providing a safe environment for their workers and their community.”

ACTU Secretary Sally McManus said “Australia is again lagging the rest of the world when it comes managing COVID. We cannot afford to make the same mistake with rapid testing as we have with vaccines and the Morrison Government must show leadership in making these effective measures available in all workplaces, but especially small businesses, as we transition to living with COVID.

Media contact:

COSBOA – Alexi Boyd 0433644097
ACTU – Peter Green 0400764200

Supported by:

- Council of Small Business Organisations Australia
- Australian Council of Trade Unions
- Pathology Technology Australia
- Transport Workers Union
- Road Freight NSW
- Western Roads Federation
- Victorian Transport Association
- Australian Road Transport Industrial Organisation
- NSW Australian Road Transport Industrial Organisation
- Queensland Trucking Association Ltd

