

New testing scheme for workers 'discriminatory'

John Weekes

A new testing system for essential workers has been unveiled amid record high Covid-19 numbers and an ongoing police stand-off with protesters at Parliament.

Pandemic response minister Chris Hipkins yesterday announced a new exemption scheme aimed at keeping critical supply chains running.

People deemed close contacts will be able to keep going to work, instead of isolating, if they return a negative result from a rapid antigen test.

The National Party said the new scheme was overly bureaucratic, and Auckland Business Chamber said it was discriminatory.

But Hipkins indicated the pandemic response will become increasingly devolved, with more decision-making assigned to private companies.

A record high 306 new community cases of Covid-19 were announced yesterday and 120 people arrested in protests over issues including vaccine mandates.

With Omicron expected to spread widely, Hipkins said the Government would not micromanage the response.

The exception scheme was announced at Melling substation in Wellington's Hutt Valley, where maintenance work is being performed to extend the life of 50-year-old transformers.

Like other so-called lifeline utilities, the installation is a critical piece of infrastructure.

Under the scheme, substation workers can get exemptions from close contact isolation requirements, if they return daily negative tests.

Other services deemed critical in the scheme include food production, health, emergency services, transport, critical financial services, news

media, social welfare and animal welfare.

Businesses can register as "critical services" if they think they'll meet the criteria when New Zealand enters the second phase of the Omicron response.

The onset of that second phase is unconfirmed but Associate Minister of Health Dr Ayesha Verrall said it would likely be activated in weeks, rather than months.

"It is up to businesses to self-assess

and decide if they want to participate in the scheme," she said.

"In doing so, there needs to be an awareness that bringing close contacts into the workplace will come with risks."

The ministers said people who work alone, or have the capacity to do so, will be able to keep operating in a "bubble of one" if identified as a contact.

This would apply to vaccinated farmers, or sole traders who were vaccinated, asymptomatic, operated out of their own space, and worked alone.

National's Covid-19 response spokesman Chris Bishop said the new system would demand ridiculous amounts of information.

"It's unbelievable that this Government has managed to design the most bureaucratic system possible."

Bishop said that workers had to provide two separate letters, a form of identification, business information, and a rapid antigen test order number.

"The simple point is this: Make rapid antigen tests ubiquitous, widely available at private businesses."

Auckland Business Chamber chief executive Michael Barnett said rapid testing tools should be available for every worker.

"It's all very well for officials to say one set of workers is more important than others and businesses which think they meet the criteria can apply," he said.

"The need to have such a list is a sign of failure."

Meanwhile, protests continued at Parliament from people airing a number of concerns, including opposition

to vaccine mandates.

Yesterday afternoon, Wellington District Commander Superintendent Corrie Parnell said 120 people were arrested at the Parliament grounds.

Associate Justice Minister Willie Jackson said he was saddened by some of the anti-vaccine messages voiced at the protests.

"Too many angry people are threatening some of our workers, some of our MPs, and I'm disappointed by all that because I think we should be able to agree to disagree."

Jackson said he met some protesters and was glad he spoke with people present.

"Mandates are necessary, absolutely necessary, but obviously

there's got to be a day when we get past that."

But Jackson said vaccine mandates were important for now, to keep people and businesses safe.

Epidemiologist Professor Michael Baker said case numbers in another five or six days could near 600 and exceed 1000 in another five to six days after that.



Dr Ayesha Verrall



Chris Hipkins