Politics

At risk families need to be protected during letter limbo

GMB is calling on the Welsh Government to clarify guidance and protect vulnerable workers waiting for NHS letters caught in backlog.

GMB, Wales' general union, has called on the Welsh government to clarify guidance to allow at risk workers to self-isolate to protect themselves and their families whilst waiting for GP's letters.

Current guidance highlights people who are being treated for life-threatening conditions including cancer and chronic respiratory conditions like cystic fibrosis or severe asthma are at increased risk from COVID-19. The guidance outlines that the NHS will directly contacting people with these conditions, and if they didn't receive a letter before March 29th they need to seek a note from a GP that will allow them dispensation from work to isolate.

However, many people are still waiting for a letter from the NHS or their GP, leaving many employers unwilling to grant dispensation for workers to socially shield. This is forcing thousands of workers to make an impossible decision between putting bread on the table or protect their families.

GMB is calling on the Welsh Government to clarify guidance to allow workers that know they are at risk to be able self-identify as at such, and socially shield in advance of receiving an NHS letter.

Mike Payne, GMB Senior Organiser, said:

“Every day we are dealing with numerous new cases where employers are refusing to let workers isolate until they have an NHS or GP letter.

“It is imperative that the Welsh Government clarify guidance immediately, allowing at risk workers or workers with at risk members of their household, to have the ability self-identify and be able to self-isolate for up to 12 weeks without being lumped on statutory sick pay. It would be fairer for this group of employees, who are shielding loved ones, to be furloughed without the need for them to be made otherwise redundant.”

“This can’t be left up to generosity of individual workplaces, we need a standardised guidance that instructs employers to protect at risk workers and that is applied consistently across the workforce.

“This guidance is vital, and could save hundreds of lives.”

In recent weeks, other bodies including the Asthma UK and the British Lung Foundation have also expressed similar concerns to the GMB that the delay on the letters is having.

Joseph Carter, Head of Asthma UK and British Lung Foundation Wales, said:

"It's incredibly important that everyone does all they can to keep themselves safe from COVID-19, especially if you already have an underlying health condition.

"We understand there have been delays in people with severe lung conditions receiving social shielding advice by post, so I urge anyone concerned they are at risk to self-isolate while they wait for official communications to come through. If you think you fall into this category and do not receive a letter in the coming days, please contact your GP.

"Please stay safe and ensure you follow all the public health advice being given. If you need advice regarding a pre-existing lung condition, please do contact the BLF Helpline for free on 03000 030 555."

Press office

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