

Workplace clusters now a major concern

MALAYSIA is currently dealing with a surge in Covid-19 cases. It has been reported that the bulk of these new clusters originate at workplaces. Although many are working from home after the implementation of the second movement control order, which has now been extended to Feb 18, there are still many sectors that are operating as usual.

According to Health director-general Tan Sri Dr Noor Hisham Abdullah, 73 clusters recorded new cases, with the Jalan Puchong construction site recording 322, Jalan Chulan construction site 85, and Tembok Cluster in Taiping with 81 cases.

The spike in cases at worksites is a major cause for concern. We must look into alternative avenues to tackle this issue, including wide-

spread testing and treatment for infected workers.

It is not enough for us to merely have a lockdown in place. The government must also come up with strict measures to ensure that the lockdown is effective in bringing the numbers down.

In the construction sector, for example, Construction Industry Development Board (CIDB) standards, procedures and guidelines are in place. But these must be more closely enforced and action must be taken against parties who are found to be flouting the regulations.

With regard to workers' accommodation, the minimum standards stipulated under the Worker's Minimum Standards of Housing and Amenities (Amendment) Act 2019 will need to be provided. The number of reports on the poor con-

ditions of workers' accommodation has increased. Proper sanitisation also has to be done in these quarters to ensure that the virus can be contained.

If the number of new cases continues to grow, the government will have to consider closing down the sectors that are heavily affected. The operation of sectors during the lockdown will have to be reviewed, especially the construction sector.

There needs to be a stricter lockdown this time around, similar to the first lockdown implemented in March 2020 where most of the sectors were closed. Economically, we understand the need for certain sectors to operate, but in the long run, in order for businesses to sustain themselves, it is vital that we control the Covid-19 numbers first.

Alongside the need to close certain affected sectors, financial aid will also have to be given to workers.

The government recently announced financial aid where employers in states under MCO would be eligible to apply for assistance irrespective of their sector. Eligible employers will receive a wage subsidy of RM600 for each employee earning less than RM4,000. The limit has also been increased from 200 employees to 500. The Human Resources Development Fund will also exempt employer levies for companies that are unable to operate during the MCO and conditional MCO period.

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