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The welfare support system for PALM workers

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SUMMARY

- PALM welfare support arrangements are basic to ensuring the success of the Scheme. On paper, they are multi-faceted and comprehensive.
- PALM welfare support includes both formal, government-mandated components with informal, community-driven elements, but missing is a collaborative and systematic team approach to how these elements operate together in practice.
- Approved Employers (AE) are mandated to have one full-time Welfare Officer per 120 workers. However, as these welfare officers are engaged by the AE, workers may fear that their employment is at risk if they make a complaint or lodge a grievance. Survey data shows only a minority of workers would seek help or complain directly to employers. No required skills are specified for welfare officers.
- Workers with grievances or their worker advocates can contact the Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR) by phone or email. However, no data exists on usage or outcomes of this dedicated communication channel.
- Country Liaison Officers provide workers with a trusted means of communication, but survey data shows workers rarely turn to them to address their grievances.
- The government-funded Community Connections Program is contracted to the Salvation Army, working with Church and diaspora partners. The program seeks to integrate workers into their local community and connect workers to local community services. There is also a limited Emergency Support Fund for crises.
- Significant informal/community support also comes from church groups and diaspora networks. However, they remain largely unfunded.
- Regional meetings such as PALM scheme Regional Engagement Forums are improving understanding and collaboration, but more needs to be done to make the available welfare support better understood and more effective.

INTRODUCTION

Little is known about the nature and extent of the welfare support available to PALM workers. Lacking is a comprehensive picture of how these components work separately and collaborate to meet the needs of PALM workers. Approved employers vary in how well they understand and are able to meet their welfare obligations. Workers are often confused about what support is available and how to access it. The wider community does not know about the support provided and the media and many researchers do not make the effort to find out. This blog describes the components of the system and assesses its strengths and limitations.

THE WELFARE SUPPORT COMPONENTS

The complex set of welfare support arrangements for PALM workers, includes both formal, top-down components and bottom-up, community-based components. Some elements are proactive and others are reactive. The top-down welfare support requirements of the scheme are government mandated, while other forms of support are community-driven.

FORMAL WELFARE SUPPORT REQUIREMENTS

The first component is the government mandated welfare support obligations of Approved Employers (AEs) of PALM workers. The PALM Guidelines states that ‘Worker welfare and wellbeing is critical to the success of the Scheme’. These obligations revolve around the AE’s Welfare and Wellbeing Plan and the role of a Welfare and Wellbeing Support Person, hereafter shortened to Welfare Officer, who is employed or appointed by the AE in particular. AEs must ensure that there is the equivalent of one full-time Welfare Officer for every 120 PALM Workers they employ.

Chapter 9 of the PALM mandated Guidelines 2.1 (27 March 2026) on worker welfare and wellbeing spell out the AE’s responsibilities in 56 ‘must’ and 4 ‘must not’ statements in bold over 11 pages. These statements cover a very wide range of tasks, ranging from financial support, safety in the community, supporting worker community engagement, skills development and managing worker grievances.

This document serves as the foundation for worker welfare support, with the Welfare Officer being the first port of call for all addressing worker concerns. It is this breadth of mandated welfare responsibility that places such a huge burden of responsibility on the AE. Nevertheless, the extent of this responsibility is so little understood or acknowledged by many outside the Scheme.

Details of the formal requirements

The PALM Guidelines state that the AE’s Welfare Officer must meet the workers face-to-face at least once a fortnight and document any actions taken to address workers concerns. The limitation of this arrangement for dealing with worker concerns is that the welfare officer is either an employee of the AE or has been engaged by the AE to perform the role. This may prompt a potential fear for workers that if they raise their concerns with the welfare officer, it may threaten the security of their employment. A further limitation is the competency of the welfare officer. The Guidelines state that he or she must be ‘a fit and proper person to be involved in the scheme’ and ‘is suitable to provide welfare and wellbeing support’. The welfare officer, along with other staff, is also required to complete within a month of commencement a cultural toolkit related to the worker’s country of origin to help staff to ‘work effectively and appropriately with workers’ (para 9.2.2). The lack of a specified skills set means that welfare officers can vary greatly in the appropriate skills they bring to their role.

Grievance handling mechanisms

A second component of the PALM worker support structure gives workers the opportunity to make direct contact with the federal Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR). This can be done by using a 1800 number or email contact, operated by the PALM scheme support service. This contact can be made by the worker or by an advocate on behalf of the worker such as a union representative if the AE’s Welfare Officer has not resolved a worker’s concerns. This is done in such a way that the worker is protected from repercussions.

However, the process requires workers to share their personal concerns via a phone to email to a stranger rather than to share the information to someone they trust. The extent of use by workers of this mode of communication to identify matters of concern is unknown. DEWR has not released data on contacts made, responses given and the resulting outcomes.

Workers are also encouraged via the PALM website to seek information about their workplace rights from other government agencies such as the Fair Work Ombudsman (FWO).

The role of Country Liaison Officers (CLOs)

Some 15 Country Liaison Officers (CLOs) and two Labour Attaches are appointed by the workers' sending country, with some CLOs paid by their home governments and others paid for by the Australian Government via the aid program. Their travel costs to visit workers are paid for by Australia. They have potentially a key role to play in workplaces by interacting with the AE's Welfare officer.

The Country Liaison Officer can play a crucial role as an intermediary because of their common language and culture, and the trust this creates. In this way they are well placed to assist in the resolution of issues of concern at the workplace. However, the limitations on how well CLOs do perform this role are significant. They are 'liaison' officers, not 'welfare' officers. As such, they are not expected to be involved in routine matters of welfare; at best they can assist AEs in the resolution of more extreme situations. These limitations on their role may help explain the survey results, reported in Figure 1 below, which show that workers say that they are not likely to report a complaint to a CLO.

Regional Relationship Managers

A fourth part of the formal system is the role of DEWR Relationship Managers based in regions with high numbers of PALM workers. Their role is mainly focused on monitoring the compliance of approved employers with their welfare and related obligations, such as meeting accommodation requirements rather than providing direct support to workers. They also help organise regional community engagement forums, which are discussed in more detail below.

PALM Community Connections Program

The final component of the formal system of worker welfare support is the Community Connections Program. This Program does not have any direct role in managing worker welfare issues. However, by connecting workers to their local community, and so addressing the worker experience of dislocation from home, it contributes greatly to worker wellbeing. The Salvation Army is the program manager for this DEWR-funded program in association with its partners: the NSW Council for Pacific Communities, Pacific Island Council of Queensland, and the Uniting Church of Australia (Synod of Victoria and Tasmania). The program started in 2021 and is now in its second contract stage to the end of June 2027. There are one or more coordinators in each state and territory. All but one of these coordinators come from the cultural backgrounds of the PALM Scheme's ten partner nations.

The program's role is to help PALM workers 'build strong connections within their local communities, access support services, and maintain their wellbeing while living and working in Australia'. Community Connections staff work with 'workers, approved employers, local councils, community groups and government agencies to promote social inclusion, strengthen community ties, and ensure workers are supported practically and socially'. Its activities include assisting the AE's welfare officers whose responsibility it is to connect workers to local services such as church groups, sporting clubs, health services, financial or community support groups. The program also organises social, cultural and wellbeing activities involving workers and local communities.

The program also has a direct welfare support role as a last resort in the form of providing access for PALM workers to an Emergency Support Fund. This is a limited pool of money managed by the Salvation Army which can provide short-term emergency assistance, such as crisis accommodation or food, to PALM workers who have exhausted all other support avenues. Its funding is for a very small minority.

INFORMAL WELFARE SUPPORT FOR PALM WORKERS

The role of team leaders

Informal support comes from a range of sources. Team leaders, normally heading a group of up to 20 workers, are key contact persons for the AE's Welfare Officer and the CLO. Team leaders are also the most important support people for most workers. Figure 1 below shows that half of the short-term seasonal workers surveyed would seek advice or help from a team leader and about the same proportion would make a complaint through them.

Union representatives

According to a December 2023 report by the Australia Institute (p.7), unions, such as the Australian Workers Union (AWU), have provided support to workers. This has included help to recover unpaid wages, to transfer to another employer or represent workers in disputes with approved employers over accommodation, deductions and hours of work.

It is mandated that representatives of Australian unions as well as the Fair Work Ombudsman be invited to take part in Arrival Briefs for workers so that workers understand their rights and protections under Australian law. However, their focus in this role is not directly on worker welfare and wellbeing.

Paid support from community-based organisations

Some community-based organisations provide direct welfare support through staff paid out of their own funding. The faith-based advocacy group, Australian Catholic Religious Against Trafficking in Humans (ACRATH), funds a Seasonal Worker Support officer who speaks Tetum. Based in Melbourne, her role is to support all workers in the PALM Scheme in Australia. However, her own cultural heritage means that her primary focus has been to work with the Timorese workers in Victoria.

A local community organisation in Warrnambool, the Fletcher Jones Family Foundations, funds a part-time support worker for the regional

Timor Leste community, with a focus on the 400 PALM workers at Midfield Meats who come from Timor-Leste (Midfield Meats also employs 100 workers from Fiji and 20 from Vanuatu). The funding is to create a 'community of care' through the activities of a paid support liaison worker, cooperating with Midfield Meats, to help workers overcome practical and emotional hurdles, such as navigating local healthcare, banking, and government documentation. Other support focuses on establishing key social connections, such as integrating many Timorese and Pasifika workers into local church groups. The support worker also provides a trusted point of contact for mental health, wellbeing, and managing the emotional toll of family separation.

Other paid form of community support includes the Anglican Church funding of a full-time 'Community Priest', based in Sunraysia, to support PALM workers. The Uniting Church also employs a full-time Solomon Island Pastor to support PALM Workers in NSW/ACT.

Volunteer community support

Volunteer community support comes from local church groups, sporting groups, service clubs, local businesses and diaspora networks. Activities include community welcome events, weekly worship gatherings, participation in sporting teams, cultural festivals, and bilingual workshops on relevant skills for workers. In these ways, the majority of PALM workers have the opportunity to engage in aspects of local community life.

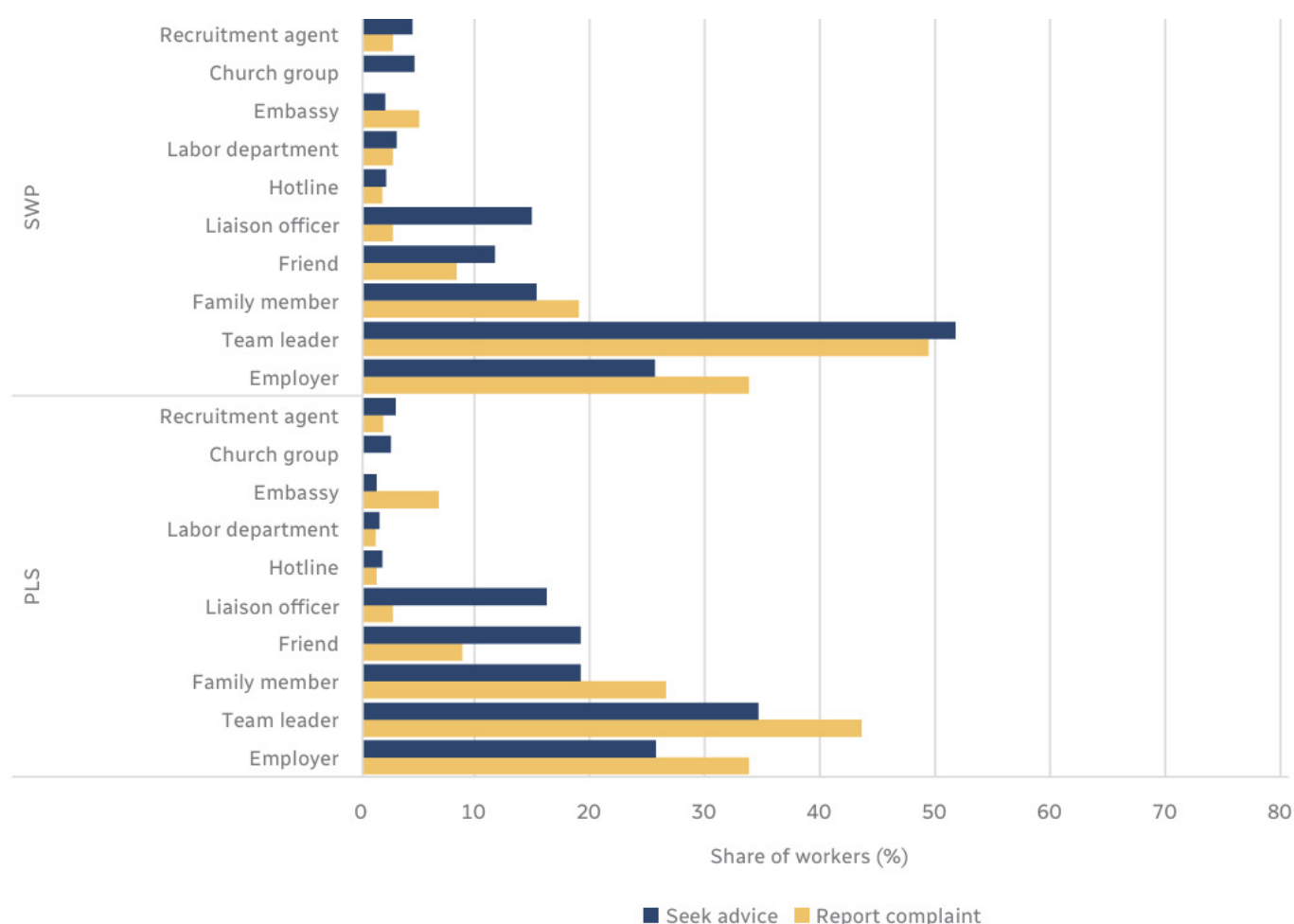
Diaspora communities across Australia in particular are a significant source of welfare support. The New South Wales Council for Pacific Communities and Pacific Island Council of Queensland are funded for their support role through the Community Connections Program. However, many other diaspora groups and individuals also provide support, which is largely unrecognised and unfunded. Yet it is often a critical means of support because of the close ties with the workers from their country. One common joint activity for diaspora groups is to host workers to take part in home country festivals such as independence celebrations.

EVIDENCE ON WORKERS' CONTACTS WITH THE WELFARE SUPPORT

The 2023 Pacific Labour Mobility Survey of workers, based on a random sample of 2,085 workers from Kiribati, Tonga, and Vanuatu provides valuable information on PALM workers attitudes to different sources of advice and who they can complain to. Survey results, as shown in Figure 1 below, show that only one in four workers say they would seek advice or help from an employer or their representative. Only one in three workers would report a complaint to an employer but the worker's reason for not wishing to do so was not asked.

This reluctance to report a complaint to an employer means that a majority of workers would prefer to use another way to seek help or make a complaint. Team leaders are the most important person workers would turn to for advice or to make a complaint, with Country Liaison Officers among the least likely they would turn to.

Figure 1: Distribution of responses to where Seasonal Worker Program (SWP) and Pacific Labour Scheme (PLS) workers would seek advice or help or report a complaint, per cent



Source: extracted from Figure 80, p 96. In Dung Doan, Matthew Dornan, and Ryan Edwards, 2023, *The Gains and Pains from Working Away from Home: the Case of Pacific Temporary Migrant Workers in Australia and New Zealand*. The World Bank and Development Policy Centre, ANU.

FOSTERING EFFECTIVE CONNECTIONS

A major challenge is for the providers of different elements of welfare support to pool their resources to ensure that the needs of the worker are addressed in a more effective and collaborative manner. This requires that the welfare support providers have a clearer understanding of worker needs and can build a team approach to welfare support. Regular meetings for the different welfare support providers provide the opportunity to raise issues of concern. These meetings can also encourage providers to partner with others to address these concerns, and to monitor and report on the actions agreed and decisions taken.

Regular meetings of paid support providers in Victoria

The above approach was initiated in 2023 in Victoria, when one of the authors (Randall), as the Community Connections Regional Coordinator, took part in an informal meeting with the Victorian-based CLOs, and DEWR worker support staff. The meeting's purpose was to discuss matters of common responsibility and concern. This sharing opportunity proved to be of such great mutual benefit that it quickly evolved into a more formal structured monthly meeting which has continued now for over two years. This has created a sense of teamwork across the vast, but poorly connected network of support for workers and employers. In consultation with CLOs nationally, DEWR has recently built on this initiative as a recommended practice across all states and territories. Alongside this development, there are also monthly meetings that bring together all CLOs and all Community Connections Regional Coordinators.

Regional Engagement Forums

PALM scheme Regional Engagement Forums (PREF) are another opportunity to bring together a wider group of stakeholders concerned with worker welfare as well as the workers themselves. These are now two-day events organised by Community Connections regional coordinators and regional DEWR officers. The events focus on specific issues of importance to the operation of the PALM scheme and its workers.

By way of example, a recent PREF (24-25 May 2026) held near Shepparton in Victoria addressed over the two-day event the issue of worker health. Specific attention was given to mental health, sexual health, and reproductive health. The first day was dedicated to the workers, the second day was dedicated to AEs. To maximise the attendance, workers gathered on a Sunday, a non-workday, and commenced with a Christian worship service. Approximately 80 workers attended.

The forum gave attention to sexual and reproductive health and conducted a participative workshop on how workers can manage stress. Focus was on understanding mental health signals such as low mood and anxiety, making use of healthy coping mechanisms and how to access local mental health and wellbeing support services. Mental and physical health factsheets were made available in all PALM scheme sending country languages.

The forum also provided workers with one-to-one access to government officials for information on superannuation payouts, tax, visas, health insurance and road safety. DEWR staff explained to workers the PALM scheme grievance management process, emphasising what grievances are, how to report them, and what the process involves.

CONCLUSION

The core of the PALM welfare support arrangements is the legal employment and duty of care relationship between workers and an approved employer. This is meant to be a relationship of mutual benefit, but it is between two unequal parties. The purpose of the complex arrangements is to acknowledge and respond to the actual and potential disadvantages workers face. AEs are responsible for implementing a huge range of legal obligations.

More collaboration is needed between the many other stakeholders who are involved in supporting this complex relationship: government agencies, CLOs, Community Connections, paid and unpaid community support workers and members of the diaspora. These stakeholders need to be part of a cooperative network based on regular exchanges of information. The efforts of the other stakeholders, especially the informal providers of support, are commendable in helping to foster high-trust relationships between workers and employers. However, more can be done to ensure that all stakeholders work together more closely to meet the needs of workers and approved employers. This requires more focused educational resources, and greater support for AEs and their welfare officers.

Another aim of better collaboration between the formal and informal elements of the welfare support arrangements should be to make the system better understood by the wider public in Australia and in the sending countries. In the end, this will be the real test of the success of the PALM scheme, domestically and diplomatically in the region.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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