

Safety and wellbeing of PALM workers: room for improvement

by Lindy Kanan and Judy Putt

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Workers' accommodation in Far North Queensland

Photo Credit: Lindy Kanan

The Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme has been hailed as a triple win for the benefits it brings to Australian employers, the workers from the Pacific Islands and Timor-Leste who participate, and their countries' economies. We have researched the social impacts of the scheme, in particular the safety and wellbeing experiences of workers while they are in Australia. Our findings show there is room for improvement in the welfare arrangements that underpin the scheme, to reduce the likelihood of adverse experiences and to ensure an appropriate safety net. A report details our findings; in this blog we summarise the key messages that we think policy makers should be considering.

In a recent blog, Richard Curtain underlined that the welfare of workers is a strong focus of the PALM scheme and that it is highly regulated and monitored. In effect, for workplace-related conditions and matters, the onus is on approved employers and government agencies. Information is also provided to workers prior to and upon arrival about access to services, health insurance and laws in Australia, such as those relating to driving. However, our research found that many workers did not necessarily know what they were entitled to, or who they should turn to for help with more personal or difficult concerns.

We found that PALM scheme workers experience an array of individual and social issues while they are in Australia. Common concerns relate to pay, deductions and employment conditions. Other issues that were raised related to health insurance, mental health, sexual and reproductive health, violence against women, family separation and alcohol abuse. There were also rare, serious personal matters that had been reported.

Our survey found that workers were most likely to approach their employer or their team leader (a fellow PALM scheme worker) to seek assistance. However, when we asked workers about barriers to accessing wellbeing support, the number one barrier (selected by 56.4% of respondents) was "worried about losing job or visa". Under the scheme's worker support arrangements, workers are told that their

employer should be their first point of contact if they have a problem. But workers can be reluctant to seek help through this avenue due to the fear of losing their opportunity to work in Australia. Other researchers have drawn similar conclusions, stating that the potential benefit of reporting a problem (for example sexual harassment) can be outweighed by the potential risk of not being sponsored for subsequent work seasons.

Some employer representatives that we spoke to said that, while their agreements with the government require them to support the welfare and wellbeing of their workers, they did not feel adequately equipped to do so. They spoke about how the scheme required them to go beyond “normal” boundaries and provide guidance on personal issues in addition to workplace issues.

PALM scheme workers ideally need access to a support mechanism that is independent, confidential, culturally safe, in the worker’s preferred language, Australia-based and also available face-to-face. Some would argue that this is the role of the country liaison officers (CLOs) who are employed by sending country governments. The problem is that, so far, the ratio of workers to CLOs has been too high. One CLO may be responsible for supporting 2,000 to 5,000 workers in the cases of countries with large worker numbers such as Fiji, Samoa, Timor-Leste, Tonga and Vanuatu. The Australian government announced funding for more CLOs in the May 2023 budget, however it remains to be seen how this model can be effectively scaled up.

A welcome initiative has been the Community Connections program, which is managed by a consortium led by the Salvation Army. Our research found that in some locations, the Community Connections program is playing an important role in connecting employers and workers with services. In other locations (at the time of our data collection in 2022), there was no visibility of the program, despite it being announced in 2020. Many of the Community Connections partners are state-based Pacific Island councils, which have been integral in navigating cultural divides and providing culturally safe support. The current approach to market provides an opportunity for the program to be strengthened and play a more prominent role in supporting workers.

A challenging aspect of the PALM scheme, which has flow-on effects on worker safety and wellbeing, is that many work sites are located in regional areas where services are already under immense pressure. Where services are available, often there are barriers which prevent workers from accessing them, such as language and cultural barriers, cost and lack of transport. Services that routinely use the national Translating and Interpreting Service spoke about difficulty accessing translators who speak the required languages.

Another factor that negatively impacts worker safety and wellbeing is the temporary nature of their engagement. We observed that PALM scheme workers can be a lower priority for services because of their temporary visa status. One service told us “we can’t even look after our own people, let alone these people as well”; and migrant support organisations said that their role was to support permanent migrants, not temporary ones.

What was noticeable was the crucial role local advocates or community groups can play in assisting individual workers and facilitating cultural and welcoming events.

Greater program transparency and sharing of data could optimise delivery of the PALM scheme. Services and communities can better support PALM scheme workers if they have information on the numbers of workers in their area, their culture and the languages they speak. We received this feedback from hospitals, health services, police and local government officials. Many of these services have cultural liaison roles, or potential for these roles if there is an identified need and funding available. A more systematic approach is required to ensure that all local councils have the information and resources they need to support the scheme and foster inclusive and welcoming communities.

We’d like to stress that most of the people we spoke to were positive about the PALM scheme. No one was calling for it to be abolished, only improved. Many recommendations from research participants involved improvements in the scheme’s welfare arrangements; people spoke of the need for a more proactive rather than reactive approach.

The federal government needs to increase efforts to engage state and local governments who are responsible for services that impact worker wellbeing. More care and planning are needed so that PALM scheme workers can access independent and culturally appropriate supports, to keep them safe and well while they work in Australia.

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