Inquiry into Modern slavery risks faced by temporary migrant workers in rural and regional New South Wales

Organisation: Be Slavery Free

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Modern slavery risks faced by temporary migrant workers in rural and regional New South Wales

Joint Civil Society Submission

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CO-SIGNATORIES

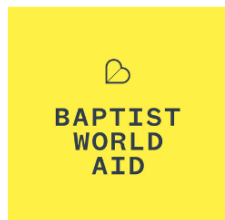|			
A21	ACRATH – Australian Catholic Religious Against Trafficking in Humans	Anglican Diocese of Grafton	Anglican Diocese of Newcastle
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FOREWORD

Instances of modern slavery in NSW are an urgent issue that needs to be addressed with robust data and effective responses. In 2024, numerous reports documented egregious cases of worker exploitation, from wage theft and overcrowded living conditions to deceptive recruitment practices. The NSW Anti-Slavery Commissioner's report, **Be Our Guests**, has highlighted systemic vulnerabilities that leave workers—particularly temporary migrants—exposed to conditions of modern slavery.[1] An in-depth, rigorous inquiry is urgently needed to investigate these practices and propose solutions.

This Inquiry will need to not only address existing modern slavery and related exploitation but also prepare for the future by examining how Australia engages its migrant workforce. The global labour market is undergoing profound shifts, driven by labour shortages in developed economies, which have been further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. These changes have permanently reshaped labour engagement practices, with some industries heavily reliant on migrant workers to fill domestic labour gaps.

For example, in Japan, acute labour shortages, worsened by an ageing population, are projected to reduce economic growth by 0.7% annually until 2025 and by 0.9% thereafter.[2] In response, Japan has implemented targeted visa programs, allowing foreign workers to fill critical roles in industries such as aged care and agriculture. These initiatives highlight the interconnectedness of global labour markets and the necessity of international labour mobility to sustain economic stability and growth. Similar schemes exist in Canada, UK, EU, USA, the Gulf countries and of course Australia. Across the world, people often migrate from nearby developing economies to middle-income nations—sometimes through regular channels and sometimes irregularly—for the purpose of work.

Similarly, Australia's horticulture, meat processing and aged care sectors face chronic labour shortages due to factors including the seasonal nature of the work and limited domestic interest in employment. Programs like the Pacific Australia Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme have become essential, providing over 30,000 workers by mid-2024 to meet agricultural labour demands.[3] The role of international labour in labour-intensive industries is likely to increase, becoming a prominent feature of Australia's agricultural future. This arrangement also benefits the workers' families and communities, as improvements in their ability to send earnings home may have a significant impact. With the right investment, this presents a continuing opportunity for regional economic development and the operation of a profitable and sustainable agricultural industry in Australia. The reliance on temporary migrant labour has also exposed significant vulnerabilities. Reports of substandard housing, wage theft, exploitative conditions and forced or bonded labour within these schemes demonstrate that current systems are insufficient to protect workers adequately.

The supporters of this submission hope that this Inquiry will be a pivot-point for NSW, ensuring migrant workers in the state are not exploited and do not experience modern slavery. The schemes can also continue to make a valuable contribution to the development of sending countries.

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SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

The co-signatories of submission make the following recommendation to the members of the Inquiry committee (1) and the NSW Government (2-5).

1. **Implement a collaborative, evidence-driven approach to the Inquiry**

    To ensure meaningful and lasting change, the Inquiry will be helped by adopting a multi-faceted approach that integrates strategic partnerships, rigorous evidence collection, worker-centered insights, and comprehensive industry analysis. Key actions include collaboration between governments, unions, NGOs and industry, leveraging subpoena powers to uncover exploitation, prioritising worker testimonies with safeguards, and engaging with sending countries to address broader impacts.

2. **Regulate labour hire companies operating in NSW**

    Addressing modern slavery risks in labour hire operations is urgent for the NSW Government, as ongoing Federal Government delays create a pressing need for state leadership. NSW should define its 'red lines' for how the federal framework will be implemented and take immediate steps to regulate labour hire providers in high-risk sectors such as horticulture, and meat processing. Civil society considers further inaction unacceptable, reinforcing the expectation that NSW will lead on this issue. Developing guiding principles tailored to NSW's specific modern slavery risks will ensure a stronger framework that avoids weak enforcement mechanisms and sets a clear standard for compliance.

3. **Collaborate with the Federal Government on labour and migration policies**
    It will be helpful for the NSW Government to adopt a co-regulated approach with the Federal Government to address gaps in labour and migration policies that increase risks for vulnerable workers, ensuring stronger protections, enforcement mechanisms, and information-sharing on temporary migrant workers. Effective policies require better coordination across state, local, and federal agencies to resolve visa issues, support irregularly documented workers, and improve enforcement. This includes advocating for expanded worker protections in federal labour programs, such as providing PALM visa holders access to Medicare and the Fair Entitlements Guarantee, and pushing for greater enforcement powers and investigative funding for the Fair Work Ombudsman.

4. **Invest in Increasing the Visibility of Workers**
    The NSW Government must improve data collection and worker visibility to address hidden exploitation. Key actions include increasing funding for the NSW Anti-Slavery Commissioner to operate a well-resourced hotline, expanding the Commissioner's investigative powers to inspect suspected sites of modern slavery, and developing worker voice initiatives such as anonymous reporting platforms. Strengthening these mechanisms will enhance enforcement, expose systemic abuses, and improve protections for vulnerable workers.

5. **Provide effective support and oversight in rural and regional areas**
    Targeted investment is needed in oversight, services, and workforce capacity. This includes increased funding for police, health services, and local councils, as well as infrastructure like legal aid access points, and mobile outreach teams. Comprehensive training for frontline workers should focus on labour trafficking,

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vulnerabilities of irregularly documented workers, and culturally responsive practices.

6. **Address housing pressures to prevent exploitation**
   Significant housing shortages for migrant workers in key agricultural regions heighten modern slavery risks. NSW should consider creating an addendum to Housing 2041[4] focused on migrant workers, encourage public-private investment in regional accommodation hubs, and streamline planning regulations to incentivise quality housing development.

DISCUSSION – A SYSTEMS APPROACH TO MODERN SLAVERY IN AGRICULTURAL INDUSTRIES

Addressing modern slavery in NSW's agricultural industries requires a systems-based approach that goes beyond identifying structural vulnerabilities that allow workers to be exploited. Such an approach will need to consider the pressures driving different stakeholders to make exploitative decisions and the justifications that rationalise and perpetuate these behaviours. By examining these interconnected factors, the policies and recommendations arising from the Inquiry may effectively disrupt systemic exploitation and drive meaningful change.

Stakeholders and accountability

It's clear that a variety of stakeholders, including criminal organisations, are exploiting worker and system vulnerabilities to cut labour costs, and leading to instances of modern slavery.

Recent data from the Australian Federal Police (AFP) reported a 140% increase in modern slavery cases from 2018 to 2024, including instances within the agricultural sector. According to AFP Human Exploitation Commander Helen Schneider, victims of human trafficking are often treated as commodities by organised criminal groups and subjected to degrading conditions solely for exploitation and profit. She stated:

> *Criminal syndicates will use deceptive recruitment tactics to target and force vulnerable individuals into these appalling situations and trap them into endless cycles of debt, forced labour or domestic servitude*[5]

It's not just criminal organisations exploiting vulnerabilities; employers and suppliers also contribute to these practices. While the vulnerabilities being exploited might be the same, the pressures driving their decisions and the justifications they use differ. In many cases, modern slavery is the extreme product of incremental decisions made by industry stakeholders—perhaps unintentionally—but never-the-less creating conditions for modern slavery practices to emerge.

These decisions frequently involve a network of stakeholders—such as farmers, suppliers, and third-party providers—that perpetuate harmful practices. For example, a farmer may act as both an employer and accommodation provider, or a labour hire company may arrange housing through unregulated third-party providers. These overlapping roles blur accountability, making it difficult to address the exploitation of workers.

Structural vulnerabilities and stakeholder behaviour

Addressing structural vulnerabilities in NSW's agricultural sector is an obvious place to start. Evidence clearly suggests that gaps in legislation, the reliance on migrant workers to raise complaints, and inconsistent enforcement are being exploited by a variety of supply-chain actors. However, as multiple fraud and structural misconduct theories argue, structural vulnerabilities alone do not instigate harmful actions. Instead, for a stakeholder to take advantage of structural vulnerabilities, in this case to exploit their workforce, they are compelled by external pressures and key justifications are at play to allow the actor to rationalise the behaviour.[6]

Disrupting exploitation and achieving change

For the Inquiry to deliver effective policy recommendations that prevent employers and suppliers from taking advantage of workers, a systemic approach to modern slavery is required. This approach should examine structural vulnerabilities, the pressures on employers and suppliers, and the justifications enabling exploitative behaviour. Only by addressing this full spectrum of factors can policymakers design interventions that disrupt systemic exploitation and ensure meaningful change in the sector.

The scope of the Inquiry will need to include an examination of the various driving and enabling factors and provide recommendations that respond to the multiple dynamics at play. This comprehensive perspective will ensure that proposed solutions effectively address the root causes of exploitation.

The supporters of this submission hope the NSW Government takes this challenge seriously and demonstrates a willingness to invest accordingly. By doing so, the government can close structural vulnerabilities, reduce pressures on employers and suppliers, and invest in education to challenge the stereotypes and assumptions that justify exploitative decisions.

CASE STUDY – WORKER ACCOMMODATION IN AGRICULTURE AND MEAT PROCESSING

In 2024, Be Slavery Free carried out an analysis of the root causes of sub-standard worker accommodation in fresh food and meat processing in Australia. Be Slavery Free looked at a range of factors at play that enable accommodation providers to cut costs through accommodation, directly increasing risk for worker exploitation and modern slavery. Be Slavery Free held over 60 interviews with stakeholders' suppliers, retailers, industry associations, government departments, unions, workers and civil society organisations. This research will be released in 2025 and has been adapted and summarised here for the benefit of the Inquiry.

1. Structural vulnerabilities

The governance structure for agriculture, abattoirs and labour in NSW is being exploited by employers and networks of providers, including those responsible for accommodation and transport. Several systemic vulnerabilities contribute to this exploitative practice:

Legislative gaps
NSW lacks a labour hire licensing authority, unlike Victoria and Queensland, leaving no mandatory checks or accountability mechanisms for labour hire contractors. Additionally, inconsistent local council zoning and building regulations complicate compliance, creating uncertainty for both employers and workers and enabling unchecked exploitation.

Limited oversight
Regulatory agencies are under-resourced, hindering their ability to perform inspections or address complaints, particularly in remote areas. Social audits, such as SMETA, often fail to monitor off-site housing and informal labour arrangements, leaving significant blind spots and enabling minimal accountability.

Lack of data
There is no centralised database to track worker conditions, subcontracting arrangements, or grievances, which obstructs efforts to identify abuse patterns or measure the effectiveness of interventions. This lack of transparency perpetuates governance gaps and hinders policymaking.

Unclear jurisdictional responsibility
Modern slavery risks are fragmented across local, state, and federal jurisdictions, leading to poor coordination and accountability. Local councils manage zoning and accommodation standards, states oversee labour laws, and federal agencies handle visa and migration policies. These efforts are disconnected, enabling providers to exploit gaps and evade scrutiny.

Reliance on labour hire
The sector's heavy reliance on labour hire providers introduces layers of subcontracting, which dilute accountability and obscure responsibility for workers' conditions. Without a licensing scheme, providers operate with minimal oversight, perpetuating unscrupulous practices. Employers often fail to disclose labour hire use, creating further monitoring blind spots.

Exploitable workforce
Systemic vulnerabilities render workers, particularly migrants and irregularly documented individuals, highly susceptible to exploitation:
- Fear of retaliation, language barriers, geographical isolation and lack of communication infrastructure including internet services, and social isolation deter workers from lodging complaints, especially in rural areas with limited support systems.
- Irregularly documented workers face significant risks, including substandard wages and poor housing, due to their fear of deportation and lack of legal protections.
- PALM ties workers to single employers, creating power imbalances that discourage complaints and allow exploitative accommodation practices to persist unchecked.

2. Pressure on supply-chain actors

Economic, operational, and environmental challenges drive cost-cutting measures that often lead to exploitative practices. Key pressures include:

Supply challenges for suitable worker accommodation in regional areas
Lack of affordable and appropriate housing exacerbates worker vulnerability and creates opportunities for exploitation by employers who control both employment and living conditions.

Commercial relationships between supply-chain actors
The purchasing practices of grocery retailers, including downward pricing pressures and short contract terms, can incentivise suppliers to cut labour costs.
- Chronic workforce gaps compel employers to rely on exploitative recruitment methods, to meet demand.
- Adjustments to schemes such as the PALM and Working Holiday Maker (WHM) programs may have unintended consequences, influencing worker vulnerability and employer practices.
- The Fair Work Commission's entry-level wage adjustments in April 2025 may drive some employers to cut costs elsewhere, potentially impacting worker pay or conditions.
- International trade tariffs, biosecurity threats, climate change impacts, and increase operational pressures on agricultural businesses, may contribute to the decision to pursue exploitative cost-cutting measures.

3. Justifications

Some employers justify underpayment or poor living conditions by citing:

Financial constraints and industry norms
Claims that thin profit margins or competition necessitate labour cost reductions.

Assumptions about what workers are accustomed to
Stereotyping based on workers' backgrounds to rationalise substandard conditions or pay.

Toward systemic change

Effective policy to address worker accommodation in NSW's agricultural sector must recognise the structural vulnerabilities and pressures that allow exploitative practices to persist. Strengthening labour hire regulation, improving enforcement coordination, and addressing the critical shortage of affordable and appropriate regional accommodation are essential steps.

Additionally, reducing the cost pressures that drive suppliers to compromise on housing standards and investing in education to challenge entrenched stereotypes about migrant workers are key to fostering long-term change.

While these measures focus on worker accommodation, they also form part of the broader challenge of addressing exploitation and instances of modern slavery in NSW's agriculture industries. By targeting these root causes and pressures, the sector can move towards a more equitable, sustainable future for workers and industry alike.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE OPERATIONALISING OF THE INQUIRY

The following recommendation relates to important factors as to how the Inquiry is conducted.

1. **Implement a collaborative, evidence-driven approach to addressing modern slavery risks faced by temporary migrant workers in rural and regional New South Wales**

    To ensure meaningful and lasting change, the Inquiry will be helped by adopting a multi-faceted approach that integrates strategic partnerships, rigorous evidence collection, worker-centered insights, and comprehensive industry analysis. A particular focus should be placed on migrant workers in agriculture and meat processing, including both PALM and Working Holiday Maker visa holders. Additionally, priority should be given to NSW hotspots identified in the Fair Work Ombudsman's Harvest Trail Inquiry Report—regions such as Griffith, Leeton, and Coffs Harbour—these are critical hubs for agricultural activity and high seasonal workforce needs, including irregularly documented workers.[7]

    1.a. Foster collaboration with government, unions, NGOs, and industry (retailers, suppliers, growers, farmer groups) to co-design policies and oversight mechanisms
    These partnerships are essential to addressing root causes and ensuring systemic accountability across multiple different stakeholders. Opportunities for robust collaboration and co-design are critical. Based on our joint experience it will be particularly important to create a framework that allows supermarkets to work together without breaching competition laws under the ***Competition and Consumer Act 2010*** (Cth). This could include mechanisms such as authorisation from the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC) for collaborative sustainability efforts, as well as exemptions for joint actions aimed at combating modern slavery risks.[8]

    We also recommend the Inquiry prioritise engaging organisations with direct access to irregularly document workers.

    1.b. Use subpoena powers to gather evidence on labour trafficking, irregularly document workforce exploitation, and gaps in auditing and compliance mechanisms
    Subpoena powers can target employers, labour hire companies, and other stakeholders to ensure transparency and accountability.

    1.c. Prioritise testimonies from affected workers to inform recommendations
    In alignment with the Inquiry's stated aim of engaging people with "lived experience as temporary migrant workers in rural and regional New South Wales," we recommend implementing robust safeguards. These should include measures to ensure anonymity in providing evidence and access to psychological support. Participants will engage in the process only if they feel safe and supported. This may require some evidence to be presented in-camera.

1.d. Engage with 'sending countries' to understand structural and developmental impacts
Sending countries (those that have formal agreements with Australia to supply workers through programs like PALM) need to be actively engaged to understand the broader effects of labour migration schemes on workers, their families, and their local economies. This includes addressing both structural exploitation and evidence of (or the potential for) positive community development in sending countries.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE NSW GOVERNMENT

2. Regulate labour hire companies operating in NSW

The need for a harmonised national labour hire regulatory body has been recognised in reports such as the Black Economy Taskforce Final Report to Government (2017)[9] and the Migrant Workers' Taskforce Report (2019)[10]. While we welcome the endorsement of a model for a national labour hire by the Australian Commonwealth, State, and Territory Workplace Relations Ministers on 6 June 2024, the NSW Government cannot fully delegate its responsibility for addressing modern slavery risks in labour hire operations in NSW to this process.[11] Any delays in implementing the Federal model will leave critical gaps in oversight and enforcement, allowing exploitative practices to continue unchecked in high-risk industries in NSW.

The Inquiry should examine the status of efforts to establish a national labour hire regulatory body, considering both the realistic timeframe for its implementation and the pressing need to address modern slavery in NSW.

In 2017, the Select Committee Report on Human Trafficking in New South Wales recommended that:

> *"The NSW Government encourage the Australian Government, through the Council of Australian Governments, to regulate the labour hire industry in Australia, and if this is not supported federally, to then regulate the labour hire industry in New South Wales."[12]*

After eight years of discussion in NSW and a Federal process that has yet to publish a proposed model (agreed to in the June 2024 meeting of federal and state ministers) addressing this is a priority.

The time has come to heed the Select Committee Report on Human Trafficking in New South Wales recommendations.

2.a. That the NSW Government develop guiding principles for best-practice elements of a labour hire framework tailored to NSW's specific modern slavery risks
The National Labour Hire Framework is proposed as a national model to be implemented state by state, aligning with existing bodies in Victoria and Queensland. However, given the likelihood of delays in implementing the national framework, the NSW Government has an opportunity to develop guiding principles driven by the specific risks of modern slavery in NSW. This work could help ensure the framework does not default to the lowest common denominators or weak enforcement mechanisms. If the federal framework is not developed, these principles will serve as a critical foundation and accelerant for implementing a state-based regulatory body.

Whether as part of a federal framework or a state-based scheme, any regulatory framework needs to include ensuring accountability and the regulation of labour hire providers in sectors vulnerable to exploitation, such as agriculture, horticulture, meat processing and aged care.

Key measures for regulating labour hire providers should include:
- **Mandatory licensing:** Require all labour hire providers to obtain a licence to operate legally and access to training on fundamental issues including payroll, legal responsibilities and best practice - ensuring they meet specific standards and comply with relevant laws.
- **Public register of licensed providers:** Establish an accessible online register of licensed labour hire providers, enabling businesses and workers to verify the legitimacy of providers and encourage informed decision-making.
- **Penalties for non-compliance:** Introduce a comprehensive penalty framework to ensure compliance with labour standards, including fines for minor infractions, blacklisting, and license revocation for repeat or severe violations. Penalties should include mandatory contributions to worker remediation funds and incentivising compliance. It is essential that the penalty framework include the ability to prosecute an employer for using unlicensed labour hire provider.
- **Worker protection:** It will be necessary to allow a prosecution to proceed without requiring a worker to testify. In prosecuting labour hire violations, it is feasible to proceed without requiring the affected worker's testimony by leveraging various forms of corroborative evidence. Financial records, such as payment transactions from a labour hire company or from a supplier to a labour hire company, can serve as critical evidence. These records can illustrate the flow of funds and potentially highlight the discrepancies indicating unlawful practices.
- **Grievance mechanisms:** Provide workers with safe, anonymous channels to report exploitation or non-compliance.
- **Third-party monitoring:** Empower independent third-party organisations, such as unions or NGOs, to audit licensed providers and contribute to the scheme's oversight and compliance.

2.b. If the federal framework process is not imminent, the NSW Government should prioritise establishing a state-based Labour Hire Authority
In the absence of federal progress, NSW ought to move swiftly to create its own Labour Hire Authority. This body would ensure accountability, transparency, and enforcement of labour hire standards. Alignment with any federal framework can occur at a later date.

2.c. Require that labour hire providers are obligated to report the arrival of new workers to local councils
This reporting should include details of accommodation provided and compliance with local standards. Enhanced coordination with councils would strengthen their ability to monitor risks and address breaches within their jurisdictions, ensuring better oversight and accountability for worker conditions.

3. Collaborate with Federal Government on labour and migration policies

Collaboration between the NSW Government and the Federal Government is crucial for addressing gaps in labour and migration policies that increase risks for vulnerable workers. Effective policies, strong enforcement

mechanisms, and increased sharing of information on temporary migrant workers with the states and territories are necessary to tackle systemic issues, uphold standards, and protect workers from exploitation.

Federal labour programs, such as PALM, demonstrate the importance of a robust regulatory framework in safeguarding workers. While PALM guidelines have improved over time and offer critical protections; gaps and unintended consequences remain. These shortcomings should not undermine the program but instead highlight the need for further improvements. In contrast, less-regulated programs, like Working Holiday Maker (WHM) visas, expose workers to significant risks, underscoring the urgency of strengthening these frameworks.

3.a. Advocate for amendments to federal labour programs, including:
- PALM
    - o Provide PALM workers with access to the Fair Entitlements Guarantee and Medicare to ensure they receive adequate protections and benefits.
- WHM
    - o Decouple WHM visa extensions from the requirement to complete specified regional work. Instead, allow extensions to be based on compliance with Australian laws, such as the Migration Act 1958 and the Income Tax Assessment Act 1997.
    - o Remove the six-month employment restriction, enabling WHM visa holders to work with a single employer for longer periods.
    - o Extend access to the Fair Entitlements Guarantee and Medicare to WHM workers to enhance their workplace rights and protections.
- Work with the Federal Government and 'sending countries' to improve the pre-departure and post-arrival training currently provided for workers with clear, benchmarked, and measurable targets on issues including a workers' understanding of their labour contract and preparedness for living and working in Australia.

3.b. Work with the Federal Government to resolve irregularly documented worker's immigration status, including considering the implementation of an amnesty for irregularly documented workers
Whilst acknowledging the importance of maintaining the integrity of Australia's visa framework, it also essential to acknowledge that its integrity is undermined by the existence of a significant number of irregularly documented workers. A solution is required.

3.c. Establish formal coordination mechanisms between state, local, and federal agencies
These mechanisms should address overlapping challenges, such as visa issues, irregularly documented workers, and housing, with a focus on improving interagency collaboration. Steps could include:
- Industry regulators and government bodies should work together to monitor and enforce standards effectively, supported by data-sharing agreements and joint investigations.
- Attention needs to be given to the accessing of federal government schemes to support people experiencing slavery or slavery-like conditions. Support for Trafficked Persons Program (STPP)[13] and the Additional Referral Pathway (ARP)[14] are resourced to operate in urban areas and are not funded to easily support workers in regional and rural areas.[15]

3.d. Advocate for increased enforcement powers and investigative funding for the Fair Work Ombudsman (FWO)
Advocating through national forums, such as the Council of Australian Governments (COAG), the NSW Government can seek enhanced powers for the FWO. These should include the authority to conduct unannounced audits and investigations and include non-wage related breaches including worker accommodation, impose higher penalties for non-compliance (including personal accountability for directors and executives), and collaborate with state agencies through data-sharing agreements and joint investigations. Strengthened powers and resourcing for the FWO would significantly improve its capacity to address non-compliance trends and protect workers.

4. Invest in increasing the visibility of workers

A key challenge in addressing modern slavery and worker exploitation is the lack of visibility into what is happening on the ground. Current detection mechanisms uncover only the tip of the iceberg, while systemic issues and hidden abuses remain unaddressed. Good public policy needs good data for its development and implementation.

4.a. Ensure adequate funding for the NSW Anti-Slavery Commissioner to either directly operate or outsource the operation of the hotline, ensuring it is well-resourced, accessible, and effective
This hotline is a core mandate of the NSW Anti-Slavery Commissioner, addressing a critical and growing need for accessible reporting and support services. While the office of the Anti-Slavery Commissioner has initiated an 1800 hotline, funding should be reflective of the scale and urgency of the issue. Additionally, with the appointment of a Federal Anti-Slavery Commissioner, there is an opportunity to coordinate a national approach for hotline coverage to improve accessibility and efficiency across jurisdictions – potentially including PALM sending countries.

4.b. Strengthen the NSW Anti-Slavery Commissioner's information-gathering and sanctioning powers under the *Modern Slavery Act 2018* (NSW), particularly by granting the authority to inspect sites where there are reasonable grounds to suspect modern slavery
Reflecting the NSW Modern Slavery Committee's findings in the Review of the Modern Slavery Act 2018 (NSW), these expanded powers would enable the Commissioner to investigate suspected modern slavery offences, detect and expose exploitation, provide assistance and support to potential victims, and refer cases for criminal investigation. Strengthening these powers would enhance enforcement, improve victim protection, and ensure greater accountability in high-risk sectors.[16]

4.c. Develop and implement direct worker voice initiatives, such as anonymised surveys or digital reporting platforms using aggregated data
These initiatives provide a tool for worker sentiment to be monitored in a manner which is safe for the workers and generates actionable data for addressing issues. Successful global platforms have demonstrated how anonymous aggregated worker data can identify hotspot regions to enable focussed interventions for remediation. Investment in worker voice tools would help surface otherwise unreported exploitation, enabling more targeted enforcement and prevention measures.

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5. Provide effective support and oversight in rural and regional areas

Building capacity and ensuring adequate investment in rural and regional areas are essential to address modern slavery risks effectively. Resource gaps in oversight, services, and training undermine the ability to protect workers and respond to exploitation.

5.a. Address systemic gaps in resource allocation and workforce capability in rural and regional areas
This includes increasing funding for police, health services, and local government agencies to enhance their ability to respond to worker exploitation. Investments should focus on developing region-specific infrastructure such as legal aid access points, mobile outreach teams, and culturally sensitive health services. Appointing specialised roles, such as multicultural liaison officers, in areas with significant migrant worker populations will further strengthen engagement and oversight. The forthcoming Migrant Resource Centre announced by the NSW Government must be resourced to effectively respond to needs in remote and regional areas.

5.b. Deliver comprehensive training programs for frontline workers
There is a clear need for the NSW Government to provide mandatory and ongoing training to government and non-government frontline organisations, including housing, education, healthcare, law enforcement and social services, to identify and respond appropriately to potential victim-survivors of modern slavery.[17] We recommend the NSW Government work closely with the NSW Anti-Slavery Commissioner to develop this training, identify opportunities for collaboration with and improving of existing training opportunities.

6. Address housing pressures to prevent exploitation

The presence of migrant workers in a community is inter-connected with the issues relating to housing supply in NSW. First, such workers drive up pressure on housing supply, particularly in regional areas such as Griffith, Leeton, and Coffs Harbour.[18] Housing supply pressure, coupled with the increased operational costs of housing workers in regional and remote location is a factor contributing to the creation of exploitative conditions through the provision of sub-standard accommodation. Such conditions heighten the risk of modern slavery and restriction of worker freedoms.

Despite the NSW Government's 2024 budget announcement of $650.1 million to build accommodation for essential workers, including $200.1 million for regional areas, and an historic investment in social housing; migrant workers are notably absent from the conversation. They are neither classified as essential workers nor included within the Homes NSW mandate for social housing. This significant segment of the workforce remains overlooked. Addressing this part of the accommodation crisis will go some way to alleviating the crisis in other sectors.

There is room for improvement—not only to increase housing supply but also to mitigate the risks of exploitation that persist in the state.

6.a. Create an addendum to the Housing 2041 strategy to address the housing needs of the NSW migrant labour workforce
It would be beneficial to involve the local council, industry stakeholders and worker representatives in the next NSW Expert Housing Advisory Panel. Additionally, an economic analysis of the projected

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accommodation needs of the state's migrant labour workforce should be conducted. This analysis should align with local council housing strategies.

6.b. Encourage public and private sector investment to develop regional accommodation hubs in key areas
Key regional hubs should be designed to meet the needs of both seasonal and long-term migrant workers, incorporating appropriate facilities and oversight mechanisms to ensure compliance with housing standards. To deliver the essential worker accommodation commitments announced in the 2024 budget, the government is partnering with Landcom to manage public and private collaborations. A similar approach should be considered for regional worker accommodation, leveraging partnerships with Landcom and utilising the Housing Acceleration Fund (HAF) to address the unique challenges faced by migrant workers in these areas.

6.c. Review and amend planning and zoning regulations to facilitate the development of worker accommodation in rural and regional areas
Streamlined approval processes and incentives should be introduced to encourage employers and developers to invest in quality housing options for migrant workers.

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ENDNOTES

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