

Submission by the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation

Discussion Paper on *Building a Stronger Pacific Family: reforming the PALM scheme*

31 October 2022



Australian
Nursing &
Midwifery
Federation



Annie Butler
Federal Secretary

Lori-Anne Sharp
Federal Assistant Secretary

Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation
Level 1, 365 Queen Street, Melbourne VIC 3000
E: anmffederal@anmf.org.au
W: www.anmf.org.au



Introduction

1. Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on the Discussion Paper on ***Building a Stronger Pacific Family: reforming the PALM scheme.***
2. The Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation (ANMF) supports the submission of the ACTU and notes that proposals for expanding and improving the PALM scheme cover a wide range of matters that remain under discussion. We look forward to the opportunity for further consultation and feedback as the process continues.
3. In addition to providing support for the submission and recommendations of the ACTU, this submission provides further information relevant to the residential aged care sector that, in our view, should form part of the decision making in relation to the operation of the PALM scheme in the care sector.

The ANMF

4. The Australian Nursing and Midwifery Federation (ANMF) is Australia's largest national union and professional nursing and midwifery organisation. In collaboration with the ANMF's eight state and territory branches, we represent the professional, industrial, and political interests of more than 320,000 nurses, midwives, and carers across the country.
5. Our members work in the public and private health, aged care, and disability sectors across a wide variety of urban, rural, and remote locations. We work with them to improve their ability to deliver safe and best practice care in each and every one of these settings, fulfil their professional goals, and achieve a healthy work/life balance.
6. Our strong and growing membership and integrated role as both a professional and industrial organisation provide us with a complete understanding of all aspects of the nursing and midwifery professions and see us uniquely placed to defend and advance our professions.



7. Through our work with members, we aim to strengthen the contribution of nursing and midwifery to improving Australia's health and aged care systems, and the health of our national and global communities. With regard to the care of older people, ANMF members work across all settings in which aged care is delivered, including over 45,000 members who are currently employed directly in the aged care sector.

General comments on the operation and expansion of the PALM scheme in the aged care sector

8. The implementation of the PALM scheme in the care sector is relatively new, providing participating workers with long term employment opportunities of between 1 and 4 years. To our knowledge, approved employers participating in the aged care sector include a number of residential aged care providers and providers participating in the two pilot projects, the Northern Territory Samoa Aged Care Pilot and the Fiji Aged Care Pilot.
9. We note the Government's recent (October 2022) Budget announcement to expand the existing aged care pilot program to support another 500 workers in 2023 to complete their Certificate III in Individual Support (Ageing) and that expressions of interest will be sought from existing PALM scheme employers to participate.
10. In view of the imminent finalisation of the two existing pilots, it would be useful to review the findings and evaluation of the program in the two existing pilot reports expected by the end of the year. This may assist and inform future discussion and decision making on further expansion of the pilots.
11. Further, consideration must also be given to the impact of the scheme, and expansion of the scheme on the countries of origin including the potential impact on a country's capacity to meet the current and future health and aged care needs of their local community and the impact on the economy more broadly.
12. From the ANMF's perspective, the welfare of the people participating and, as proposed under the new family accompaniment initiative, the welfare of family members and the family unit as a whole must be central to all decision making.



13. It would be a concern if the key driver of the changes or expansion of the program in the aged care sector were primarily in response to employer demands. Or, put more directly, employer demands for easier access to more workers should not be preferenced over measures designed to protect and support the interests of participating workers and their families.
14. Workforce shortages are one of a number of challenges facing the residential aged care sector and we would question claims by many employers that having easier access to higher numbers of workers under the Scheme is the “solution” to their workforce problems. We recommend a cautious response and one which ensures the welfare of PALM care workers with protections to ensure the provision of safe and quality care for residents.
15. The shortages of nursing and care staff in residential aged care facilities are well documented and experienced broadly across the sector. Problems associated with the attraction and retention of staff are not new, and, as the Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety noted, aged care workers, over many years, have been underpaid, undervalued and over worked.¹
16. While the Government has accepted most of the Royal Commission’s recommendations and begun the process of implementing a number of welcome reforms, the working environment in the residential care sector remains under extreme stress.
17. Covid-19 has, and continues to impact aged care facilities where an under resourced workforce is exhausted and struggling to meet the care needs of their residents. And while the broader community is “learning to live with Covid”, residents remain extremely vulnerable and at risk. Outbreaks of Covid-19 are ongoing in the sector with Department of Health and Aged Care reporting 1093 active Covid-19 cases in 204 facilities as at 20 October 2022. This includes 768 resident cases and 325 staff.²

¹ Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety, Final Report 2020, Volume 2. Available: https://agedcare.royalcommission.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-03/final-report-volume-2_0.pdf

² Department of Health and Aged Care, Covid-19 outbreaks in Australian Residential Aged Care, 21 October 2022. Available: <https://www.health.gov.au/resources/publications/covid-19-outbreaks-in-australian-residential-aged-care-facilities-21-october-2022>



18. We note in the recent Budget 2022-23 PALM advice that PALM scheme employers in the aged care sector will be selected on their ability to meet specified, transparent criteria such as consideration of the relative need for aged care workers within a geographic area, and consideration of the salary and benefits package to be offered.
19. We understand further details on eligibility criteria and conditions for existing Approved Employers to participate in the expanded pilot are in development, and urge that finalisation and release of the detailed criteria not take place without consultation and input from the relevant Unions.
20. In addition to the considerations already identified, the ANMF suggests the following areas should be included as part of the assessment process:
 - Evidence of a comprehensive induction program including information on workplace rights, wages and conditions and work health and safety matters with a right for Union representatives to speak with employees during the induction period.
 - Evidence of face to face education and training on infection prevention and control procedures including how to access, use and dispose of personal protective equipment.
 - Evidence of adequate staffing levels and skill mix across all shifts.
 - Ensuring care workers have adequate time to provide the care needs of residents.
 - A dedicated support person or mentor for PALM employees in the workplace.
 - Access to face to face and paid education and training for ongoing development in the role.
 - Hours of work and rostering to promote a healthy work/life balance.
 - Compliance with the relevant industrial instrument/s setting wages and conditions.
 - Compliance with aged care regulatory standards and reporting requirements.