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SKILLED WORKER SHORTAGE CRIPPLING HARD-HIT HOSPITALITY SECTOR

The shortage of skilled workers across Australia is crippling a hospitality industry still heavily impacted by COVID, with calls for the sector to be immediately listed as a 'critical sector' by Government.

Many hotels in regional areas are crying out for chefs and cooks, while in capitals like Sydney some major hotels do not even have enough housekeeping staff to clean rooms daily if tourism suddenly increased.

Australian Hotels Association CEO Stephen Ferguson and Tourism Accommodation Australia head Michael Johnson appeared before the Senate Select Committee on Temporary Skilled Migration, both warning the lack of international students, working holiday makers and skilled visa holders was at critical levels.

Mr Ferguson said while the first preference was always to hire Australian workers in hotels, it was proving impossible in many areas, particularly in regional Australia.

"Our number one first priority is to hire Australian workers – there's no doubt about that, it always will be," he said.

"But the reality is the local workers wanting to do jobs like chefs and front line staff simply aren't there in many areas and we need to turn to overseas workers to fill the gap.

"There are huge financial incentives for us to hire local – and they remain in place. To bring in an overseas worker costs a business anything from \$10,000 to \$25,000 when you factor in visa fees, skills assessments, migration lawyers etc and you have to wait for three months and then repeat it all again in two or four years.

"It's not something entered into lightly but the fact is many hospitality businesses have no other option – the Australian workers willing and available to do the job simply aren't there to meet the local demand."

Mr Johnson said the Government imposed international border closures and the exodus of WHM after the pandemic hit was having a huge impact on an accommodation workforce which was already struggling to fill positions – especially in the regions as business started to pick up.

"Across NSW alone, TAA estimates a labour shortage in accommodation hotels of more than 3200 workers right now," he said.

"Just one example, in Sydney recently during Mardi Gras weekend, it was ironic there was no international tourism as many hotels do not have the workforce available for daily cleaning and room turnaround – this is frightening for our sector.

“To be clear, we need to find ways and means of getting international students and WHM back into Australia to fill positions which can’t be filled locally.”

In a recent AHA survey 73% of respondents reported their businesses were suffering because of a shortage of skilled workers, more than 66% needed chefs.

AHA and TAA are calling for:

- Cooks and chefs to be added to the Priority Migration Skilled Occupation List
- Hospitality (including accommodation) to be listed as a critical sector for the purposes of the subclass 408 Temporary Activity Visa.
- International students working in hospitality to be permitted to work more than 40hrs per fortnight.
- WHM VISA holders working in tourism to be able to work for the same employer for more than six months in rural and remote areas of Australia.
- Enable pathways for permanency for temporary skilled workers currently in Australia.

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