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**For immediate release**

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**Immigration policy needs to focus on NZ’s long-term labour needs**

Proposed changes to immigration policies ignore the long-term labour needs of the aged care sector, potentially compromising care of older citizens, says the New Zealand Aged Care Association [NZACA].

NZACA CEO Simon Wallace says both the Labour Party’s immigration policy and the Government’s proposed changes to Essential Skills visa settings are kneejerk politics that ignore the longer-term needs of aged care.

“We are keen to work with current and future governments to get more New Zealanders into employment, but right now immigration is being used as a political football without consideration for future needs of aged care.

“We already face critical shortages in New Zealand’s caregiver workforce, particularly in aged residential care, which will escalate in the next decade as the need for care rises sharply with our rapidly ageing population.”

Migrant workers are essential to ensuring delivery of continuous quality care to all older New Zealanders in aged residential care facilities. Currently approximately a third of the aged care workforce are on some form of work or residence visa.

“The current proposals will seriously affect valuable labour force, disrupting continuity of care, creating higher churn and cost for employers and hindering training and upskilling,” says Wallace.

Workforce shortages are driven by factors including high churn rates of around 24%, per annum, the increasing age of the caregiver workforce and the fact that young New Zealanders are not attracted and not retained once recruited.

“Employers put significant efforts and rigorous process into recruiting the best caregivers, and always with a preference for New Zealanders.

“But they struggle to recruit Kiwis as caregivers for a range of reasons. Once employers have exhausted the New Zealand workforce pool, they must look to migrant workers to provide the care required; they have no other option.

“Whilst the recent pay equity settlement will go some way to helping attract more Kiwis into aged care by lifting wages, immigration will still be essential in addressing gaps.”

He says many migrant workers are expertly suited to the work, with nursing qualifications and experience in their country of origin, but not able to work as nurses in New Zealand until they’ve met the necessary registration requirements.

However, as caregiving does not meet the required skill levels for a migrant to apply to work on a Skilled Migrant visa, nor is it recognised as an ANZSCO Essential Skills in Demand (ESID), ruling out an ESID visa, they must apply for an Essential Skills visa – which must be renewed yearly and with no transition path to a permanent visa.

“Now with the proposed changes, setting a maximum three years’ duration for Essential Skills visa holders, these workers will be sent back to their country for a stand-down period.

“This will disrupt continuity of care, causing undue stress for vulnerable older people who need the stability and security of trusted relationships with their caregivers and creating additional recruitment costs for employers.”

Mr Wallace says it will also hinder migrant workers’ ability to achieve level 3 or 4 of the NZQA Health and Wellbeing Certificate before they are required to leave the country.

“The flow-on effect will be a shortage of qualified caregivers whilst giving migrant caregivers very little opportunity to increase their skills to a high enough level to be able to qualify for a permanent visa.

“We are very keen to work with government on all the options to ensure there is less of an impact on our older New Zealanders in care and on the sector.”

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