

Press release

For immediate release

24 October 2023

Modern slavery helpline reveals huge increase in care worker victims

The number of care workers contacting the Modern Slavery & Exploitation Helpline has rocketed, according to a new report from anti-slavery charity Unseen.

Many of these workers are from overseas, and have paid huge fees to unscrupulous employers or recruitment agencies to come to the UK on special visas designed to fill vacancies in the care sector.

Often the workers do not understand their rights in the UK, which leaves them vulnerable to further abuse.

Take Janet (we've changed her name to protect her identity), who was recruited from Zimbabwe to work in a residential care home. She did not receive a contract, and her employer charged her £10,000 for a certificate of sponsorship (in reality this costs a few hundred pounds and the cost is often met by the employer). She was then forced to work more than her agreed hours, sometimes working 18-hour shifts for up to 10 days in a row.

The report reveals the following:

- A 606% increase in care work-related modern slavery cases reported by the Helpline in the year to the end of 2022
- 712 potential victims of modern slavery in 2022 indicated to the Helpline (by care workers themselves or others) up from 106. This is an increase of more than 1,000%
- In the first six months of 2023, care workers indicated to the Helpline had an average debt of £11,800, to pay for recruitment, visa and travel costs
- Between January and June 2023 the Helpline recorded that 25 different nationalities were affected by this exploitation, with 96% of potential victims indicated as being from Asian or African countries.

Says Andrew Wallis OBE, CEO of Unseen:

“This report shows that the current approach of recruiting overseas to address a chronic shortage of care staff in the UK is a disaster for many workers. As the employee supply chain has got longer and more complicated, labour abuse and exploitation has increased.

“The Home Office needs to better apply existing laws, particularly the principle of no recruitment fees imposed on the employee, and to ensure proper scrutiny of the employee supply chain by UK care companies and recruitment agencies. It is individual workers who are paying the price of this neglect.

“We need to learn the lessons of the Seasonal Worker Scheme, which was also intended to plug a gap using overseas workers and led to many instances of labour abuse in the agricultural sector.”

Case study

Divya (we've changed her name to protect her identity) came to the UK from India to work in the care sector. She was housed with four other care workers. Their employer took their passports and ordered them to sign a three-year contract with the care company.

Divya worked in domiciliary care. Often her employer would drive her to and from clients' homes. She would complete a 12-hour shift with one client and then be expected to go straight into another 12-hour shift supporting another client, often working longer than 24 consecutive hours without breaks.

A concerned client let her sleep during a shift and provided her with food, as Divya was not earning enough money to buy provisions.

Notes to editors

More information

You can download a copy of the full report at: https://www.unseenuk.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/unseen-Care-Sector-report_spread-2023.pdf

For all press enquiries, contact media@unseenuk.org or phone 0303 040 2888.

About Unseen

Unseen is working towards a world without slavery. We provide safehouses and support in the community for survivors of trafficking and modern slavery. We also run the UK Modern Slavery & Exploitation Helpline and work with individuals, communities, businesses, governments, other charities, and statutory agencies to stamp out slavery for good.

www.unseenuk.org

About the Modern Slavery & Exploitation Helpline

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- The Modern Slavery & Exploitation Helpline is part of the leading anti-slavery charity Unseen, www.unseenuk.org
- It is confidential and independent, providing information, advice and guidance to potential victims, businesses, statutory agencies such as the NHS and police, and the public about any modern slavery issue.
- The Helpline is staffed by specialists, free to use, can take calls in more than 200 languages, and operates 24/7, 365 days a year.
- People can also contact the Helpline via the website and the Unseen App.
- Since its launch in October 2016 the Helpline has indicated more than 30,000 potential victimsⁱ of modern slavery.
- Data from the Helpline helps to shed light on the nature and scale of slavery in the UK where, experts estimate, there are more than 100,000 in slavery at any one time.ⁱⁱ
- Data is used by other charities, the police, local and national governments and businesses to inform policy and respond directly to reports of slavery and human trafficking.
- The Helpline is independent and funded by grants from trusts, businesses, fellow charities and other organisations, and donations from the general public.

www.modernslaveryhelpline.org

www.unseenuk.org

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ⁱ Figures from October 2016 to December 2022

ⁱⁱ <https://www.centreforsocialjustice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/It-Still-Happens-Here.pdf>