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Article

LOCAL NEWS

Happy to work for free



Henrike Schreer (centre) with international volunteers at Krishna Village

THE FALLOUT from a nationally televised program calling attention to the abuse of migrant workers has hit home in the Tweed with a popular volunteering program for international workers facing difficulty due to flagged legislation to address the problem.

Assistant Minister for Immigration Michaelia Cash has announced the end to a program which allowed travellers on working holiday visas to have their visa extended for an extra year in return for volunteer or paid work in rural areas in response to an episode of Four Corners which uncovered widespread abuse of the system.

The ban would have a significant impact on operations at the Krishna Village set up by the Hare Krishna community at Eungella, where up to 40 international volunteers at a time live and work to fulfil their second year visa requirements.

The village's coordinator Henrike Schreer said the government seems to have made a knee jerk reaction which doesn't take into consideration those who are doing the right thing.

"The problem here is not with the program itself, it is with some people who have not done the right thing and not followed the rules," said Ms Schreer.

"Really it comes down to the government not doing anything to enforce the rules they have set out and rather than setting up a system to monitor things and enforce compliance they are walking away from the whole thing.

"We have visitors from all over the world who come here and have a life changing experience and we do a lot to thank them in return for the work they put in.

"If there is a cost issue with monitoring those administering the program I'm sure that could be covered by pushing up the cost of the visa a bit which the travellers would be more than happy to pay."

In addition to an education in cultivating organic produce workers in the village are provided with accommodation and meals, yoga classes, massage, meditation workshops and other spiritually focused activities.

They are also expected to live by the rules of the community during their stay which include eating vegetarian meals, no smoking and no drinking alcohol.

Ms Schreer said they are aware of unethical farmers who have threatened or deceived volunteers.

"There are definitely dodgy farmers out there, but they are a minority and the new law will change nothing about that," she said.

"If I'm being molested or forced to work ridiculous hours, a minimum wage will not help me, what is really needed is a functioning quality control system that monitors all hosts for Fair Work exchange, so volunteers can make sure not to get themselves into a bad experience."

The Executive Director of Wide World of Organic Farms (WWOOF) Australia, Garry Ainsworth, said the second year visa program fills a vital role in Australian society.

"Most volunteer hosts are small

self-sustaining farmers who only sell a bit of produce at the local market," said Mr Ainsworth.

"We have an aging population of farmers who find it harder and harder to sustain themselves on their farms.

"Having volunteer help allows them to stay on their farms and contribute to society, while providing a wonderful intercultural experience for their overseas visitors."

Two of Krishna Village's current workers, Simona Sergi from Italy and Vivienne Samuels from the UK said they are enjoying their stay and do not feel in any way exploited.

"The atmosphere here is just great, it's such a wonderful place," said Ms Sergi.

"There's nothing keeping us here, anyone who feels they don't want to be here can just leave.

"I had an experience on a farm in southern NSW where the workload was just too much so I left after a week so I was very happy to find this place."

"I did not want to get paid work to fulfil the visa requirement because I'd heard so many horror stories so I was deliberately looking for WWOOFing work," said Ms Samuels.

"Being here really doesn't feel anything at all like work as you are part of a community and learning so much as you go."

Federal Member for Richmond Justine Elliot said she is aware of the concerns for working holiday visa holders.

"I have been in contact with the Krishna Village and have offered to make representations to the Minister on their behalf," she said.