

MEDIA RELEASE



Polding Centre
133 Liverpool Street
Sydney NSW 2000

**Embargoed until
6:00am 29 July 2020**

Anti-Slavery network highlights heightened risk of modern slavery during the COVID-19 pandemic

In its first annual report the Australian Catholic Anti-Slavery Network (ACAN) has found the risk of modern slavery has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

ACAN warns that migrants, refugees and temporary visa holders now find themselves in increasingly insecure work because of the current economic downturn.

ACAN will launch its first annual report in Sydney today, highlighting the greater scrutiny Catholic organisations are playing in supply chain decisions to help protect the rights of vulnerable workers and combat modern slavery.

ACAN, which was formed in December 2019, brings together 32 Catholic entities including dioceses, schools and universities and organisations across the finance and investment, health, aged care and welfare sectors.

It is coordinated by the Anti-Slavery Taskforce of the Archdiocese of Sydney and the ACAN annual report will be formally launched today by the Catholic Archbishop of Sydney, Most Rev. Anthony Fisher OP.

The Chair of the Anti-Slavery Taskforce and Australia's former Ambassador to the Vatican, Mr John McCarthy QC said the annual report highlights the progress ACAN had made in a relatively short time in working towards the eradication of modern slavery nationally and globally.

"Through this new network, Catholic entities have been sharing resources and coordinating action to manage and mitigate the risk of modern slavery across their industry sectors", he said.

"Up to 1,500 suppliers to ACAN entities are likely to be contacted over coming months with new obligations they are expected to meet to ensure they are addressing the risk of modern slavery effectively through their supply chains".

"This work is more critical than ever at a time when the risk of modern slavery has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic since those at greatest risk of exploitation, such as migrants, refugees and temporary visa holders find themselves in increasingly insecure work because of the current economic downturn".

To promote closer collaboration across the Catholic sector, 32 Modern Slavery Liaison Officers (MSLO) have been nominated by each ACAN entity, with the MSLOs meeting monthly as a group and regularly with the Anti-Slavery Taskforce executive to discuss implementation of the risk management program.

The National Procurement Manager (Clinical) with Calvary Care, Mr Jonathan Gold, said his work as a Modern Slavery Liaison Officer in the health sector has been especially rewarding during the COVID-19 pandemic.

“It’s led me to more closely scrutinise the entire manufacturing process for our medical supplies. So we’re not just asking what safety standards does a face mask meet, but also where does it come from and what are the working conditions in the factories that produced the mask. So it’s helping us build a more transparent picture of the whole supply chain in a way we didn’t have before the pandemic”, he explained.

Fellow Modern Slavery Liaison Officer, Ms Nicole Scott, has used her role to help develop new policies to combat modern slavery in the supply chains of Catholic schools as Senior Legal Counsel with peak body Catholic Schools NSW.

“Through my work with ACAN, I’m encouraging Catholic schools to make modern slavery questions an integral part of the selection process for any new supplier from construction through to IT, food services and uniforms”, she said.

“A construction company may be based in Australia and have good working conditions here, but we need to scrutinise their supply chains to ensure raw materials, like bricks are ethically sourced. An IT company may also be based in Sydney, but we need to ask who they may subcontract their services to overseas and whether those subcontractors follow ethical labour standards”.

ACAN has also been helping its members prepare their first Modern Slavery Statements, due next year, as a requirement under federal legislation.

Under the Commonwealth Modern Slavery Act, entities with a consolidated annual revenue of more than \$100 million must provide a Modern Slavery Statement on what risks of modern slavery have been identified, the steps they are taking to ensure their supply chains are slavery-free and the effective of those measures.

The launch of the annual report coincides with the United Nations World Day Against Trafficking in Persons, held on 30 July and which this year is dedicated to honouring those on the frontline in providing counselling and support to the victims of human trafficking including social workers, law enforcement officers and healthcare professionals.

A full copy of the Australian Catholic Anti-Slavery Network’s inaugural annual report is available here: <https://bit.ly/3jIOMQt>

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