

Farm Workers in Oregon

As Oregon's housing finance agency and a leader in anti-poverty programs, Oregon Housing and Community Services (OHCS) strives to improve Oregonians lives and communities. One community particularly vulnerable to poverty is the farm worker population.

Each year Oregon experiences an influx of workers in the agriculture industry. According to the Oregon Employment Department (OED) reported agriculture employment is at least double during the peak harvest season. The 2002 USDA census counted 95,506 seasonal workers. This number does not include contract labor, custom work or the families and children of these workers. A 2002 enumeration study conducted by Alice Larson also estimated 94,648 seasonal workers in Oregon annually (103,453 when food processing workers are included).

Vital to Oregon's Economy

Farm workers are vital to Oregon's agricultural economy, which produced \$3.8 billion and 220 commodities in 2003 (ranking Oregon second only to California in agricultural variety)¹. Many factors including the temporary population increase in agricultural communities, cultural and language barriers of those who migrate, and working conditions, contribute to unacceptable living conditions for these workers and their families.

Unique Problems Faced by Farm Workers: Housing

Lack of adequate housing is widely acknowledged as the greatest need facing Oregon's farm workers. In contrast to the USDA count of 95,506 seasonal farm laborers, OR OSHA reports 356 registered farm worker camps that housed 11,916 workers in 2004 (approximately 13 percent of the

¹ Oregon Agriculture. Oregon Department of Agriculture. November 2004. Statistics provided by USDA Oregon Agricultural Statistics Services.

estimated population). Farm workers who do not reside in OR OSHA registered camps are forced to compete with other low-income populations for local housing. Compounding the problem of locating adequate housing is the need for temporary housing at below market rates, rental deposits, fees and move in costs.

Income of Farm Workers

Wages received by farm workers vary according to the employer. Oregon law requires that farm workers are paid minimum wage, however they can also be paid “piece rate”, receiving a set fee per volume of harvest. Farm workers covered by Employment Insurance receive an average pay of about \$8.39 an hour or \$17,456 a year. While \$8.39 is above the state minimum wage, the majority of Oregon farm workers are seasonal, working only part of the year.

Those not covered by employment insurance, hired for a set fee, custom, or contract work are not represented in the Oregon Employment Covered wages. In 1997-1998, the National Agricultural Workers Study (NAWS) found that the national median annual income of a single worker was \$7500 and between \$10,000 and \$14,000 for families.

Health of Farm Worker Population

In the United States in 2003, agriculture, forestry, fishing and hunting had the highest work related fatality rate, almost half of which was in crop production². This industry was also among the top five for work related injuries, which required days away from work, transfer or restriction³. This was also true for Oregon. The agriculture, forestry and fishing industries accounted for the highest number of fatalities with ten of the 41 fatalities,

² United States Department of Labor. Bureau of Labor Statistics. News Release September 22, 2004.

³ United States Department of Labor. Bureau of Labor Statistics. News Release December 14, 2004.

followed by logging with eight.⁴ Lifestyle and poor living conditions contribute to a higher frequency of tuberculosis, diabetes, infections and chronic illnesses⁵. According to an Oregon Health and Sciences University (OHSU) report, migrant laborers have the poorest health of any group in the US. The most commonly reported health factors for this population and their children are: lower height and weight, respiratory disease, parasitic conditions, skin infections, chronic diarrhea, vitamin A deficiency, accidental injury, heat-related illness and chemical poisoning⁶.

Services Needed

Housing is one of many problems faced by farm workers. Oregon legislators have stated

“the availability of affordable, decent, safe and sanitary housing opportunities for persons of lower, middle and fixed income, including housing for farm workers, is a matter of statewide concern.”

OHCS has worked aggressively in recent years to identify and address the problems faced by farm workers and better serve this community. This department has commissioned research projects, partnered with CASA in the development of a farm worker housing finance manual, dedicated staff to the Farm Worker Housing Task Force and the Farm Worker Facilitation Team, adopted improved farm worker services as a departmental goal, and directed funding toward farm worker projects.

⁴ Work Related Compensable Fatalities, Oregon, 2003. Elizabeth Priddy. Oregon Department of Consumer and Businesses. http://www.cbs.state.or.us/ind/rasums/resalert/compfat_03.html

⁵Community Planning Workshop. University of Oregon. Farm Workers' Needs Assessment. January 1995.

⁶ Oregon Health and Sciences University. Reducing Pesticide Exposure in Minority Families. <http://www.ohsu.edu/croet/aghealth/family.html>

These efforts have led to the funding of 369 farm worker units, of which 223 were newly constructed or acquired and 146 were renovated. OHCS sponsored a Latino Home Buying Fair and successfully provided several farm worker families with financial assistance in purchasing a home. OHCS partnered with the Department of Corrections (DOC) as part of the Employment-Related Training program that created modular homes built by inmates for farm worker housing. Finally, the Farm Worker Information Center (FWIC) was created and is available on the OHCS web page (www.ohcs.oregon.gov). FWIC provides farm worker demographic, housing, service, and financing information.

Reporting Farm Worker Services

At this time it is difficult to assess the success of statewide efforts aimed at the farm worker population. Few state and local agencies track occupation and many farm workers fear reporting their status due to a cultural mistrust of government and fear of deportation. Most state and local agencies maintain client information such as race and ethnicity however this is not an accurate measure of services provided to the farm worker population. Those of Hispanic origin are often found in other industries such as construction. Although difficult to report on farm worker status, organizations serving this population must be vigilant in their efforts to collect this information. It is impossible to measure program or outreach success without documentation of the clients being served. It is especially important, given the stated health care needs and lack of health care availability for this community that health care services provided to this population be properly documented.

Future Efforts

The vitality of the farm worker population is essential to the well being of the state of Oregon. Low wages, temporary work, and a lack of adequate

housing and health care expose this community to poverty related issues. OHCS will continue in the fight against poverty and homelessness for the farm worker population and all Oregonians through community partnerships and program efforts.