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New Report Sheds Light on Working and Living Conditions for Farmworkers in Georgia during COVID

Findings show the agricultural industry maintains outdated standards of working and living conditions, organizations call for public health policies to shift for infectious diseases

Georgia – The National Center for Farmworker Health (NCFH) has released the results of a [local assessment](#). Through survey results and in-depth interviews, the report details the lack of health resources along with the living and working conditions for farmworkers in Colquitt County that place the population at risk for COVID-19.

“Workers in the United States should be provided with good health and safe working and living conditions, regardless of immigration status and industry,” **said Nic Mandujano, Research Associate at NCFH** “many of the farmworkers we spoke to in Georgia expressed having limited access to health services and other social supports due to their living conditions and lack of medical infrastructure.”

The survey found that almost four in five farmworkers (79%) in Colquitt County reside in overcrowding housing, a stark contrast to the national average of 2%. Living in overcrowding housing and sharing a living space with more than nine non-family members is common for farmworkers.

Farmworkers, because of the nature of seasonal agricultural work, often depend on the employer for housing and transportation. With the conditions of the pandemic, costs increased when additional rooms were needed to quarantine or to follow social distancing guidelines. Interviews with employers found cost as a barrier to not being able to provide complete isolation during quarantine or follow social distancing practices in shared living spaces. [Decreases in production profit](#) within the agricultural economy during the pandemic restricted increases in input cost, such as the cost of additional housing units for social distance housing practices.

Survey results did show an increase in housing safety precautions during the pandemic from some employers. **An agriculture employer staff member described their procedure to quarantine workers**, “we had to create spaces of housing for those isolation periods, we rented hotel rooms.”

Strong partnerships that arose between employers, advocates, and health providers in the area to address the risk of COVID-19 were critical in providing vaccines to farmworkers on-site. Seventy-two percent of farmworkers surveyed reported that they were fully vaccinated with most of them receiving the vaccine at work. However, fewer than one in three farmworkers reported receiving a booster vaccine.

Barriers to vaccines included fear of side effects from the vaccine, fear of missing work, pay, and getting fired. “A lot of [farmworkers] were concerned about not being able to carry the buckets on their shoulders because they thought their arm was going to hurt,” **said a farmworker advocate in Colquitt County when asked about specific concerns farmworkers had about getting vaccinated.**

Findings amongst farmworkers and advocates demonstrated an underlying fear in the farmworker community of lost pay from receiving a COVID-19 vaccine or booster. Working while sick, whether with COVID or other illnesses is a common practice for farmworkers for their survival. Unlike other industries, they are not afforded the same safety nets that would permit them to miss a day, let alone multiple weeks, of work. “People need to work. Who is going to pay the rent?” **said a farmworker who has been working in the fields for 20 years.**

Farmworkers were also at risk of being fired if they took time off for being sick, even if it was a workplace policy to stay home if they felt ill. **A farmworker advocate described the employer’s retaliation against farmworkers who would take time off due to having COVID,** “And even though they were told like, ‘Oh no, you get sick, yeah, you need to follow the guidelines and quarantine and get some rest’. As soon as they got better, they will get fired.”

Currently, agriculture employers in Georgia are not obligated to provide sick days to farmworkers, meaning paid time off depends on the employer’s goodwill. Nine out of 10 farmworkers surveyed said they do not receive paid sick time when ill with COVID-19.

Health resources in the area for farmworkers are scarce with only one federally qualified health center serving the entire county. Most notably, health resources lack extended clinic hours for working people, Spanish language education, or Spanish-speaking staff. This is not enough considering three out of five farmworkers reported health centers as sources of health care services and education.

“The results and the stories told by farmworkers in Colquitt County reiterate that policies and working conditions must shift to meet the needs of a public health emergency. The agriculture industry missed an opportunity to provide worker standards that address worker health and safety concerns during a pandemic,” **said Dr. Bethany Boggess Alcauter, Director of Evaluation and National Agricultural Worker Health Program of NCFH** “Working even while sick because you cannot afford to lose wages - no longer works. Having one clinic to service multiple counties no longer works. This is a call for a change for farmworkers' communities that can positively impact everyone in the region.”

NCFH survey offers recommendations for policymakers and best practices for industry leaders to improve working conditions and ensure farmworkers' health.

- more funding to make collaborations between the local Colquitt County public health department, federally qualified health centers, other health providers, farmworkers, and agricultural employers
- funding from local entities to employers so they can provide high-quality housing
- culturally sensitive education about vaccines for their farmworker community
- local government support to provide farmworkers financial assistance when they get sick or seek time off to get vaccinated, assistance programs like the state-funded Oregon Worker Relief Fund are strongly recommended.

This survey is part of the Farmworker COVID-19 Community Assessments (FCCA) project which interviewed local farmworkers, agricultural employers, and stakeholders. NCFH will be releasing results for counties in Colorado, New Jersey, North Carolina, and Washington state later this year.

The quotes above are from the FCCA in-depth interviews, therefore due to confidentiality, all participant responses remain anonymous.

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The National Center for Farmworker Health (NCFH) is a private, not-for-profit corporation located in Texas dedicated to improving the health status of farmworker families. NCFH provides information services, research, training, and technical assistance to the agricultural community and migrant health centers nationwide, as well as organizations, universities, researchers, and individuals involved in farmworker health. For updates visit www.ncfh.org.

