



## Futures for Farmworkers

Happy 2021, Housing & Hope readers! Entering a new year offers a chance for reflection and redirection, and at Catholic Community Services and Catholic Housing Services of Western Washington (CCS/CHS), the new year provides us with an opportunity to reexamine our mission and to refocus our attention on serving the vulnerable communities who work hard for the future of their families and of our country. To that end, the focus of this month's email is on our *Creating Futures with Hope for Farmworkers in Western Washington* initiative.



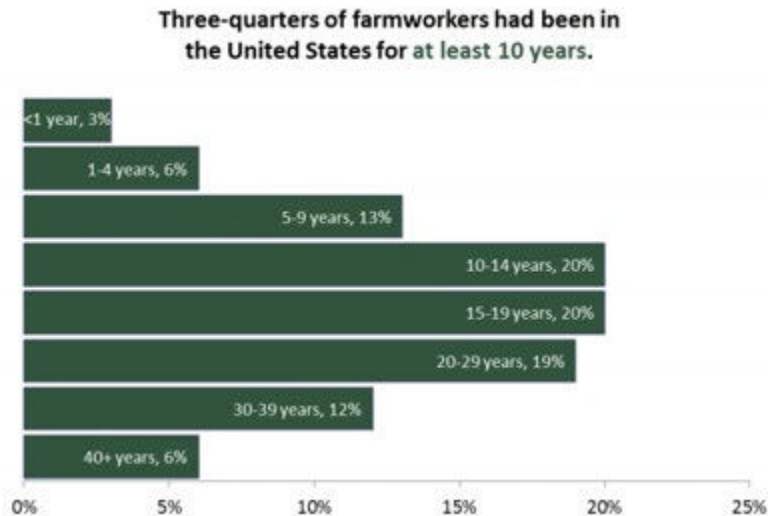
*La Casa de la Familia Santa: a CHS property providing 45 units of affordable housing for farmworkers and their families in Centralia*

### Who are the Farmworkers?

Farmworkers are the men and women who form the backbone of our nation's food system. They are a critical workforce yet, for most of history, they have been largely invisible. Farmworkers work long, grueling hours planting, harvesting, and processing crops and raising livestock to provide the country with fresh, local agricultural products.

Despite common misconceptions, a 2016 [report](#) by the National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS) revealed that 78% of farmworkers had lived in the United States for ten years or more at the time of the study, and less than 3% had moved to the States within the past year. The same survey further indicates that 33% of farmworker families live below the poverty level, and annual incomes for families of four are often less than 30% than those of the general population.

### Years Since First Arrival to the United States



*Source: National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS) 2015-2016*

The CCS/CHS Farmworker Housing Initiative addresses these issues by focusing on three overarching goals: stable housing, access to social services, and community development. Our housing developments span across Western Washington, from Whatcom to Clark Counties; out of the 2,500 units CHS currently manages, 515 are specifically dedicated for farmworker families. Our social services focus on promoting life skills, financial literacy and community leadership. We also offer assistance with job searches and business start-ups and after-school tutoring and programs for children. Our past two decades of dedication to the Washington farmworker community are evidenced by the development of healthy, stable communities through housing assistance and transformative empowerment. Today, CHS has developed and currently manages thirteen farmworker housing developments throughout Western Washington, from Whatcom County to Cowlitz County, and maintains over 500 units which provide housing and stability for over 3,200 individuals.

### Role of Farmworkers:

Farmworkers make up a tiny but essential proportion of the United States economy - comprising 1% of wage and salary workers in the country. Agriculture is the number one industry in Washington State with 15 million acres of farmland and over 300 agricultural commodities, bringing in 20.1 billion dollars in revenue in 2020. However, the [visible decline](#) in agricultural labor over the past twenty years has impacted both the farmworker community as well as the larger economy of the United States. The declining number of farmworkers since 2002 has hurt the nation's output of agricultural goods, and the effects on the farming industry span across the market.

Labor shortages and reduced farm revenues lead to cuts in other sectors, which would have led to increased spending in other sectors and “created more than 41,000 additional non-farm jobs in our economy annually.” The report further indicates that this gap in labor is not being filled by U.S.-born workers, who have offset less than 3% of the decline in the farmworker population since 2002.



*"High grade wine grapes only earn workers around \$90 per ton." [Source](#): United Farm Workers, Twitter, 2021*

These data underscore the importance of a robust and inclusive economy which can support a wide range of production and activity necessary to the continued functioning of the nation. Recognizing the disparity that arises from a population who fills such a crucial role in the economy yet has so little access to quality social services, the CCS/CHS Farmworker Initiative aims to provide opportunities for personal, familial, and community development.

### **Issues Facing Farmworkers:**

A number of unique challenges pose a danger to the health and happiness of farmworker communities. With over 69,000 farmworkers competing in the local housing market for rentals and ownership, a stark lack of available rentals to meet the needs of farmworkers and their families - coupled with living conditions that threaten the health and dignity of tenants - indicate a great need for improved housing conditions. In particular, the quality and availability of housing, routine exposure to dangerous chemicals, and lack of access to human services reveal major areas for reform.

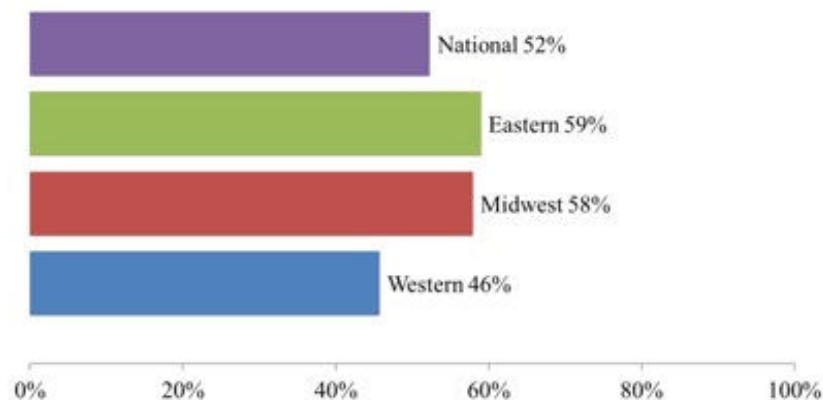


Farmworkers in Skagit County, Washington. Source: [Pew Trusts](#), originally from [Familias Unidas por la Justicia](#)

Housing issues [include](#) overcrowded dwellings and structural deficiencies. Nationwide, over half of all farmworkers live in overcrowded dwellings. Overcrowding can increase the spread of infectious diseases and therefore poses a particular threat due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Across Washington State, 35% of farmworkers [report](#) structural deficiencies such as heating, plumbing, and electrical problems, holes and leaking of ceilings and walls, and lack of sufficient kitchen and bathroom facilities. Issues of sanitization, proper nutrition, water quality, and routine exposure to chemicals and allergens (from pesticides, mold and mildew, and pest infestations) also contribute to negative health outcomes for the farmworker population.

Despite the multitude of unsafe conditions facing the population, over half of farmworkers nationwide do not have health insurance, and only 63% nationwide and 43% on the West Coast [reported](#) having visited a healthcare provider in the two years prior to being interviewed. The most commonly reported obstacles to accessing health care services include expense and lack of insurance (only 18% of employers offer health insurance to farmworkers), language barriers, and transportation issues.

### No Public Aid Utilized in Past Year



[Source](#): National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS) 2015-2016

In 2020, working with several state agencies and the governor's office, guidelines for the protection and health of Washington farmworkers in the work place was secured. This included guidelines for warehouses and food processing, for the farmworker temporary housing, and guidelines to address the language barrier in farmworker communities. Governor Inslee announced his proclamation that farmworkers are essential workers and that the employers are required to document and maintain COVID19 response plans (providing masks, handwashing stations, and other sanitary and protective equipment). However, guidelines and proclamations are temporary suggestions and recommendations. Our farmworker communities need permanent, policy-supported solutions, as well as mandatory and enforceable standards, with supervision.

It is heartbreaking that the COVID-19 crisis has so significantly impacted the farmworkers, first responders to our food supply, and that a community already so vulnerable to health concerns is at even more risk. Despite the governor's proclamation that the farmworkers are essential workers, that their work is critical to the nation, and that the agricultural industry depends largely from the immigrant community, the farmworkers continue to work for our nation with little to no value or protection. The COVID-19 pandemic, like other times of national crisis, further stresses the economic disparities already so visible in the United States, and serves as a reminder that closing these gaps are crucial for the health and prosperity of each individual, and of the county as a whole.

### **CHS and the Farmworker Housing Initiative:**

With the [knowledge](#) that the farmworker community represents one of the most socially and economically disadvantaged in the United States, and that housing can substantially impact these disadvantages, CCS/CHS specifically address the housing and community needs of the farmworker population through our Farmworker Housing Initiative. The *Creating Futures with Hope for Farmworkers in Western Washington* program is a three-part project transforming communities through stable housing, social services, and community development. Farmworkers need a safe workplace, safe housing, access to health care, sick leave, and more. But most importantly, they must be treated with respect and dignity - not only for the crucial role they play in our food industry, nor because we depend on their work, but because they are our brothers and sisters.

The *Creating Futures with Hope for Farmworkers in Western Washington* initiative began over 20 years ago, with the first housing development in Mount Vernon. At that time, program director Gloria Burton collaborated with the local St. Charles parish to understand the concerns of Father Paul Magnano and the parishioners. The issues centered on housing conditions included lack of heat, refrigeration, and bathrooms, as well as poor water quality and open-air sewage. Since then, the Futures for Farmworkers Initiative has fought for the urgent provision of decent farmworker housing across Western Washington.



CCS/CHS volunteers delivering holiday care packages to residents in Tacoma, Woodland & Kelso, Winter 2020

Today, our mission is to develop farmworker housing that is dignified and empowering for farmworkers and their families. We further aim to increase the farmworker housing supply in Western Washington, and to improve the economic status of our residents with a particular focus on moving from homelessness or instable housing to tenancy. In addition to Farmworker housing, CCS/CHS also operates the Farmworker Center (FWC) in Mount Vernon. The FWC provides a welcoming place for farmworker families to connect with educational and community resources and receive support to become effective advocates for their community's needs.

The success of the Farmworker Housing Initiative is evidence that adequate housing provides stability, and, in turn, that stable families build strong communities. Five percent of the tenants have moved to homeownership, ensuring long-term stability for their families. An average of 15 high school students graduate each year - entering college and vocational schools as first-generation students or serving in the military, thus increasing their opportunities for community and economic involvement. Such outcomes emphasize the necessity of holistic support for vulnerable populations in order to encourage continuing development and long-term success.

### **Next Steps & Possibilities for Reform:**

- There is an urgent need for food, COVID-19 testing and vaccination, as well as educational programs and materials focused on children and youth (especially under remote learning). Please contact Gloria Burton at [GloriaB@ccsww.org](mailto:GloriaB@ccsww.org) if you are able to support the Washington State farmworkers with financial or in-kind donations.
- Learn more about recent efforts to encourage proper allocation of benefits for farmworkers in Washington and across the country:

1. Learn more about the Department of Labor and Industries' current [rulemaking](#) to address hazards associated with wildfire smoke - protective equipment and training are [essential](#) for farmworker safety in wildfire regions.
  2. Keep up to date with Washington's COVID-19 emergency [proclamation](#) of paid sick leave, which expired November 2020.
  3. [Read](#) about actions taken by other states and the need for more paid sick leave protections for agricultural workers.
- Learn more about 2021 Legislative Session Bills impacting farmworkers in Washington:
    1. SB [5172](#)/HB 1217 are current bills that attempt to limit the effect of the recent victory that instituted farmworker overtime pay and culturally appropriate and effective anti-sexual harassment trainings.
    2. SB [5141](#): establishes recommendations for the environmental justice taskforce, which touches on many issues fundamental to the health of farmworker communities, including the effects of environmental exposures and socioeconomic disparities.
  - Future areas for reform:
    1. Financial incentives for land and farm owners to develop quality housing, including subsidies and tax benefits.
    2. Expansion and increased enforcement of health and living standards for farmworker communities.

Improving access to healthcare and other social services, including translators and financial assistance.

If you would like to learn more about a particular issue as it relates to the impact of race on experiencing homelessness, please contact Sienna at [SiennaH@ccsww.org](mailto:SiennaH@ccsww.org). If you received this email from an outside source, please [sign up](#) if you would like to receive our monthly Housing & Hope emails directly. For an archive of each month's story, please visit the [series homepage](#).

