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A REPORT ON:

THE OPERATION OF FOOD PROGRAMS
IN OHIO AS THEY RELATE TO
MIGRANT FARM WORKERS

Prepared For

The Migrant Service Center Project

Of The

Manpower Evaluation & Development Institute

Washington, D. C.

Prepared By:

Interstate Research Associates
1820 Jefferson Place N. W.
Washington D.C. 20036

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<u>Page</u>
THE OPERATION OF FOOD PROGRAMS IN OHIO AS THEY RELATE TO MIGRANT FARM WORKERS	1
Parameters Of This Assessment	1
Background On The Area	1
Administration Of Emergency Food Funds	6
The Food Stamp Crisis	7
The Welfare-Caseworker Syndrome	9
RECOMMENDATIONS	14

THE OPERATION OF FOOD PROGRAMS IN OHIO
AS THEY RELATE TO MIGRANT FARM WORKERS

Parameters Of This Assessment

The assessment was a short-term project due to constraints of time and money. Two staff members, one with a general and public administration background, and the other, an attorney, made the assessment. Both staff members were bilingual in English and Spanish and had a long history of experience in programs involving migrant farm workers. A total of ten man days were expended in the effort.

The assessment was conducted with the cooperation of the Catholic Better Community Development Commission, Inc., (CBCDC) which is actively involved with migrant farm workers in at least two counties in northwestern Ohio. CBCDC has received emergency funds from two Office of Economic Opportunity sources one of which is specifically for migrant farm workers. The utilization of that fund was the primary concern of this assessment.

The very nature of emergency food money distribution indicates that the traditional structures for handling these needs cannot satisfy all the problems. The assessment was, therefore, made in an atmosphere of caution and suspicion on the part of some of the respondents.

Background On The Area

The State of Ohio is a heavy migrant user State. Although there is some conflict as to the exact number, it is generally accepted that around 20,000-25,000 migrant farm workers work in Ohio each year. (This figure does not include children and other family non-workers).

The principal crops utilizing this labor are sugar beets, cucumbers, and tomatoes. Approximately one-third of the actual migrant farm labor force utilizes the services of the State Employment Service. The rest of the migrants contract directly with growers or through a crew leader. A growing number of migrants free-lance looking for work without any previous guarantee.

Most of the utilization of migrant farm labor occurs in the northwestern part of the State during the months of June through August; some decline is experienced in July.

Although Ohio is generally considered a "better" State in terms of migrant working conditions, it still has some very serious problems. These include the usual grievances of low wages, sub-standard housing, and a hostile community.

Last year, Ohio experienced a "labor dispute". An organization called the Farm Labor Organizing Committee (FLOC) launched a concerted effort to win union contracts for migrant farm workers. Led by a young fiery Mexican-American college student by the name of Baldemar Velasquez, FLOC called for a strike and finally managed to win twenty-two contracts.

Despite this significant change, the overwhelming majority of farm workers are still unorganized. The threat of a farm labor union, however, has had an impact on growers and canners.

In close association with the Ohio Farm Bureau, an organization called the Farm Labor Advisory Group (FLAG) has been organized this year. FLAG's goal is to "try to protect farmers, tell them what their privileges are, inform them of Federal and State laws, and advise them on how and ... how not to deal with (farm) labor unions". Under these circumstances, the atmosphere in the area is understandably less than cordial to strangers.

In the latter half of June, unusually rainy weather was prevalent in northwestern Ohio. Normally, migrant farm workers perform a great deal of work during this time.

This initial work period is particularly important to the migrants. Typically, they have just passed the winter in South Texas living on occasional local agricultural or agricultural-related jobs. In late May or early June, the migrants enter the northward stream -- usually on borrowed money. Those first weeks of work are, therefore, of utmost importance. With this initial income, they can pay off some debts and still have some money with which to live.

Without the usual work available in Ohio, the migrants had a serious emergency on their hands. Through different sources, migrants heard of the anti-poverty program and the Welfare Department -- they began to look to both for assistance.

With the exception of the Farm Labor Organizing Committee and the Farm Labor Service (State Employment Service), the Catholic Better Community Development Commission has the most day-to-day contact with the migrant of any agency in Ohio. The CBCDC operates two anti-poverty centers in northwestern Ohio. One is located in the Mexican-American section of Toledo and serves the populous county of Lucas. The center is known as the Guadalupe Center and operates as a delegate agency to the county CAA. The second is known as the Opportunity Center and is located in the agricultural community of Fremont. The center also operates as a delegate agency to the local four county CAA known as the Wood, Sandusky, Ottawa, and Seneca Community Action Commission.

The CBCDC also operates a VISTA Associates Program that concentrates on migrant problems throughout northwestern Ohio and a Self-Help housing program

funded directly from O.E.O. Headquarters in Washington, D. C. The CBCDC had received authority to spend up to \$11,000 of emergency food funds from the Migrant Service Center Project. The Migrant Service Center in turn had received its funds for national distribution from O.E.O. Headquarters in Washington, D. C. These funds are specifically earmarked for migrant farm workers and their families.

The on-site visit occurred just as the emergency had begun to subside. It was interesting to note that various elements in the community had denied that there was even any emergency. Others tended to minimize the extent of the crisis.

In a statement printed in the Fremont News-Messenger on July 19, 1969, Davis Sunderland, a district manager for Northern Ohio Sugar Company, stated that no emergency situation of any consequence existed that year. He further stated that migrants had received more wages this year than in previous years. The statement appeared to enjoy official State support, since it insinuated that this was the conclusion of the Executive Committee of the Governor's Committee on Migrant Labor.

The Governor's Committee is a product of the recommendations of the Eisenhower Administration. There was no evidence that any direct representation of migrant farm workers existed in this Committee. There were, however, various representatives of agricultural interests in this Committee. Various respondents close to the migrant situation reacted bitterly when the Governor's Committee was actually undermining efforts to bring about some solutions to migrant problems.

At the height of the emergency, various community elements had reacted positively toward the situation. The Lucas Co. CAA in conjunction with the County,

Welfare Department and the County Commissions set up an emergency center in Bono, a small agricultural community. Several churches sent out appeals for donations of food, clothing, and money. The emergency center in Bono was also used for the certification and sale of food stamps.

Although the community response to the emergency was commendable, especially in the more liberal County of Lucas, various circumstances combined to sour this experience. Some of the county agency people felt that the emergency had been deliberately exaggerated by FLOC and anti-poverty workers. Some of the migrants who received food stamps in Lucas County were later found to be residents of other counties.

This matter was discussed with several people. We asked if it was possible that the migrants who were from out-of-state to begin with could have been honestly mistaken about the county in which they temporarily resided. One Lucas County CAA official who seemed unusually soured by the experience stated that this possibility was not real. We were guided on this assessment by a local life-time resident of the area. We asked her to indicate to us at what point we left Lucas County. We were in Sandusky County before she indicated that we were out of Lucas County--- in the meantime, we had transversed an entire adjoining county.

On June 24, 1969, some 200 migrant workers crowded the Sandusky County Welfare Office to apply for food stamps and general aid. The Welfare offices were ordered closed and the police were called. No violence occurred nor were there any arrests.

The Welfare Department charged that they were being harrassed by labor organizers and their anti-poverty sympathizers. The Opportunity Center in Fremont retorted that they had simply referred the migrants to the proper agency and that this agency was insensitive to the needs of the migrants. It was

alleged that some migrants had applied two or three times for aid and had waited for over a month without being contacted. Specific families were named to attest to this fact and the team received verbal confirmation of these allegations from migrant farm workers.

Administration Of Emergency Food Funds

An examination of the pertinent records regarding emergency food funds was made. Each of the two centers had slightly different systems for controlling the operations of the fund.

A random review of the forms entitled "Request for Emergency Food Resources" was made at each center. The forms and their contents were compared with O.E.O. and Migrant Service Center Project guidelines and no discrepancies were noted.

Initially, cash grants were made to the eligible migrant families. Subsequently, arrangements were made for a voucher system. Several grocery stores agreed to accept the vouchers for food purchases. The cash register receipt was then attached to each voucher and submitted to the CBCDC for payment.

The Guadalupe Center in Toledo had much better rapport with the Welfare Department and had made arrangements for the purchase of food stamps with the Emergency Food Funds.

Operationally, the Center staff was making some routine spot checks on forms to verify the accuracy of the information. Applicants that filled in information which appeared to be questionable were given money for only one or two days instead of the allowable maximum of fourteen days. These applicants then had their information verified and were either given additional funds on

vouchers or were disqualified on the basis of the investigation.

Although there was a lag in tabulating the vouchers and consolidating the data, the administration of the emergency food funds seemed adequate. Additionally, the center staff had collected extra information on each of the applicants which could be of some value.

The Food Stamp Crisis

Theoretically, at least emergency food money should be used primarily in those areas that have no Food Stamp Program or in those counties where the Surplus Commodity Distribution Program cannot meet the demand. The Food Stamp Program should meet all food emergencies since under present Federal law it is technically possible to receive free food stamps in emergencies or situations where no normal expenditures for food would be made.

In an interview with one county welfare director, it became clear that, at best, there exists a tremendous gap between what the program can do, in theory, and what actually happens at the local level. The director had never heard of the possibility of receiving free food stamps. On the contrary, he insisted that it was illegal to use the O.E.O. Emergency Food Funds to purchase food stamps. (Despite the fact that the national guidelines for O.E.O. Emergency Food monies specifically encourage this procedure).

Given the known average annual income of migrant farm workers plus the court decisions making length of residence in a geographical area an illegal requirement for welfare benefits, one would assume that migrants would have at least one problem solved. This is not the case. In Ohio, "Public Assistance Households" normally get certified for food stamps for one-year periods.

Migrant farm worker families, who usually receive less net annual income than Ohio's welfare recipients, can get certified for a maximum period of one month and usually only one or two weeks. This is due to the fact that Ohio's current regulations provide that "Households with irregular income shall be certified for a period of one month or less"¹. Migrants can and often do make fairly good wages for a short period of time. The significant point, however, is that on an annual basis, they are more than eligible to receive food stamps.

The certification process also requires that documentation on earnings be provided. In practical terms, this means that the migrant farm worker has to take a form to his employer and get him to vouch for his earnings (or lack of them) by signing said form. Often the grower will refuse to do this.

There are several reasons for a farmer's refusal to cooperate. If he is actually paying less than the Federal minimum wage, the farmer will be reluctant to, in effect, testify against himself. Other farmers feel a general reluctance to giving aid to the poor on the premise that this will lead people to expect "something for nothing and that the government owes them a living". Other farmers preferred that the workers have as little contact with "trouble-makers" (meaning anti-poverty workers especially) as possible.

Needless to say, some growers were most cooperative during the Ohio crisis. They made loans to their workers and personally helped them apply for food stamps and emergency food funds.

¹ Food Stamp Program - Plan of Operation, State of Ohio, Department of Public Welfare, p. 10.

The anti-poverty workers including the staff of the CBCDC complained that the Welfare Departments seemed to always have excuses for not helping migrants. One case in point was chosen for this report.

The Welfare Department Director in Sandusky County responded to charges of "red tape" in certifying migrant workers for food stamps by stating that his work load had doubled during the emergency and that he could not suspend any normal procedures. (In an interview with said Director, he did indeed produce figures to substantiate this point). The Welfare Director further stated that there were no more additional funds to hire extra personnel. The CBCDC offered to supply the funds for hiring another caseworker to handle the extra paperwork. The Director then stated that the County Commissioners would have to approve this action. The County Commissioners were contacted and they stated that they would acquiesce to any arrangements along these lines agreeable to the Welfare Director. The Welfare Director then stated that even though the funds might be available, the State regulations prevented him from hiring anyone unless they met certain professional standards as a qualified caseworker, and that none of these types of people were available. The CBCDC then went out and found a person who met these professional requirements and who agreed to accept a temporary position with the Welfare Department. The Welfare Department Director then stated that he could still not hire him on some vague grounds concerning the possibility of liability.

The Welfare-Caseworker Syndrome

Although neither staff members are qualified psychologists, as laymen we perceived some attitudes that were felt to be worth mentioning.

During the assessment, we had occasion to talk to different people that had varying degrees of contact with people requesting aid. These ranged from the professional day-to-day welfare caseworkers to anti-poverty workers who had just recently begun to perform similar roles as their Welfare Department counter-parts.

As a very gross, and probably somewhat unfair, generalization we found the professional caseworkers with the following tendencies:

- a. A pronounced concern for those applicants who might be trying to cheat the system characterized by an inclination to demonstrate how they had successfully thwarted these efforts.
- b. A tendency to emphasize all the things that aid recipients had (such as, television sets, radios, cars, etc.) with a corresponding downgrading of their felt deprivations, and;
- c. A change in reference terminology -- from "our people" to "these people". A certain callousness seemed to emerge after repeated contact with aid applicants. It is a well documented fact that poor people of every color, nationality, and race, tend to seek certain material objects like flashy cars and color television sets in order to compensate for the multitude of other deprivations that they must endure. Somehow, seasoned "caseworkers" tend to forget this elementary fact, and in turn become punitive in their actions toward poor people because they feel that "these people" should not have these things.

While the above is not particularly new, it was interesting and somewhat

depressing for us to find that this syndrome was gradually beginning to make itself evident in those people in the emergency food program. The syndrome was completely absent of the top of the CBDC structure and more pronounced at the lower level.

Migrant Farm Worker Profiles

At the request of the Migrant Service Center Project, the assessment team also performed a non-statistical, non-empirical, and non-structured survey of some migrant farm worker families. Some of those interviewed had participated in the Emergency Food Program while others had not.

The survey was both facilitated and at the same time hampered by the fact that some of the families were acquaintances and family friends of the members of the team. The interviews were held at the Opportunity Center, at the camps, on the street -- the best ones were held at the "Spanish Bar" in Fremont, Ohio.

All of the migrants interviewed came, directly or indirectly, from Texas. They were all Mexican-American or Mexican resident aliens. They all used Spanish as their primary, if not exclusive, means of communication. They were all poor in terms of O.E.O. definitions. In addition to these characteristics, the following traits were also observed:

1. A significant number, almost one out of three, of the families interviewed had not previously worked in Ohio before this season. The majority also indicated that they had never worked for their present employer. This is in sharp contrast to the local rhetoric that states that most migrants come back each year to

Ohio to work for the same employer. The point to be derived from this is that there is no stability or regularity in the migrant stream.

2. The majority of the migrants did not have a solid job commitment before coming to Ohio. The majority of the migrants did not even know that there was such a thing as an interstate job order and job recruitment effort. Some had not even heard of the employment service.
3. Most of the migrants worked on a piece-rate basis. It was very difficult to evaluate whether or not they were earning the minimum wage. The wage-determining system was relatively complicated and a significant number of the migrants did not understand it but accepted it, albeit reluctantly, on faith.
4. Several families mentioned that the growers were using the threat of mechanizing to force the migrants into more favorable teams for the employer.
5. Most of the farm workers realize the fact that machines and chemicals were going to replace them in a matter of years but they did not have any notion of what else to do.
6. Very rarely did the migrants state that they enjoyed the travel and mobility of migrant farm work. They preferred steady jobs in their own home in Texas.
7. About half of those interviewed, stated that they had considered settling down in Ohio where jobs were more readily available than

in Texas. Most of these stated that the lack of housing had discouraged them.

8. Most of the migrants stated that the lack of work in the area had caused them serious problems. One family stated that they had lived on beans and flour tortillas for over a week.
9. In terms of getting assistance from the Welfare Department, the migrants had several complaints that were frequently mentioned. They felt that the Welfare Department did not understand their problems. For example, the migrants would often send their first paycheck back home in order to cover their mortgage payment on their homes. This was extremely important to them, since they needed a place to go home to after the season. Yet, the Welfare Department would not give them assistance on the basis that their immediate past earnings were adequate.

Migrants complained that they had difficulty communicating with the Welfare Department personnel, since these entities often did not have Spanish-speaking personnel. The place and time for the sale of food stamps was also inconvenient for them. Because of the way that the Welfare Department computed their wages (not on an average), migrants did not get a significant "bonus" on the cash-food stamp exchange. Since food stamps could not be used to buy other essential grocery store items such as soap, laundry detergents, and toilet tissue, the migrants felt that the exchange was not worth the effort.

10. Most migrants felt that their housing was grossly inadequate. Some families stated that as many as six people had to sleep

in one room.

11. The Emergency Food grants of \$1.00/day per person was not adequate to feed people unless it could buy food stamps.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the above findings and observations, the assessment team makes the following recommendations:

1. The Migrant Service Center Project should make it very clear to the Office of Economic Opportunity that the greatest deterrent to migrant farm worker participation in the food stamp program is the certification process. The Office of Economic Opportunity should use all of its influence to make the Department of Agriculture understand that current food stamp state plans discriminate against migrants for the reasons described in this report. An examination of the Federal legislation (PL 88-525) reveals that this change can be made administratively.
2. The O.E.O. should take the lead in coordinating or at least catalysing a program designed to train local welfare department directors on what these programs can do and how to be more sensitive to the needs of aid applicants. Such a program should enlist the wholehearted participation of the Department of Agriculture and the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare plus the appropriate Federal regional offices and state departments.
3. The M.S.C.P. and O.E.O. should consider revising their guidelines on the maximum amount of funds that can be granted. Perhaps a provision could be made to allow recipients, who cannot

get food stamps with their cash grants, to receive a larger cash grant or food voucher.

4. O.E.O. should consider merging some legal assistance money with the emergency food money so that welfare departments could be challenged in the courts for their lack of response.
5. The administration of the Emergency Food Money taxed heavily the personnel resources of the grantee, the CBCDC. Consideration should be given to building-in some administrative costs. This is particularly true if O.E.O. wants to carefully document the prevalence of hunger and malnutrition.
6. O.E.O. should give serious consideration to funding a study of what we described on this report as the "Welfare-Caseworker Syndrome". Such a study should be goal-oriented, i.e., finding out how to curb this attitude through training and sensitivity techniques.