

MIGRATORY LABOR IN DELAWARE

A staff report prepared by Sanford Kravitz

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WELFARE COUNCIL OF DELAWARE, INC.
1203 Gilpin Avenue
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"Americans must try to do more about helping the human beings...whose ceaseless wanderings have stirred the conscience of the American people. We must look to the time when states and counties will recognize that migrant workers are vital to their economy and will see to it that the nature of migrant labor does not deprive workers of their welfare rights as American citizens."

Dr. Herold C. Hunt

Under Secretary of Health,
Education Welfare

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As part of our desire to stay abreast of conditions in the State of Delaware which affect the health and welfare of our citizens, the Welfare Council staff has watched with interest and concern the increasing numbers of migratory farm and cannery workers in Delaware. From time to time requests which we have been unable to fill have been made to the Welfare Council for information concerning these workers.

In order to see at first hand some of the conditions under which migratory workers were living and working in Delaware, I spent two days last summer visiting camps, farms and canneries, talking to migrants, state officials, cannery operators, farmers and interested citizens.

This report will give you some background on migratory labor in Delaware, some comments on my tour, discuss some of the problems and will suggest possible Council action.

The Migratory Labor Force in Delaware

Approximately 5,000 migratory farm workers annually come into Delaware during the summer season. The period of heaviest concentration in the state is during July, August and early September.

Some idea of the relative size of the migratory labor force can be gained from comparative figures. For instance, Delaware has a force of 5,000 migrants with its population of 390,000; Virginia has about 15,000 with its population of 3,000,000 people; and New York state probably has about 20,000 to 30,000 with its population of 18,000,000 persons. In ratio to permanent population the migrant population is extremely high in Delaware.

These migrants are for the most part Negroes who are natives of either Florida or Georgia. About 5% of the 5,000 are Puerto Rican laborers brought in under contract with the Government of Puerto Rico.

Delaware is part of the Atlantic Coast migratory stream. Many migrants move up the coast hitting each state as a particular crop is ready for harvesting. It is estimated that in 1955 about 3500 of the migrants were part of contract gangs and the balance were so called "free-wheelers" who moved on their own from state to state picking up jobs where they could. One estimate states that about 8% of the 5,000 migrants are children under 14 years of age. No accurate count of children is available. The 8% figure seems very small.

The major crops for which migrant labor are used are asparagus, beans, corn, tomatoes, cucumbers and potatoes. I have no estimate on what proportion of the migrants are employed in the "industrial" canning operation. It should be noted that the cannery workers spend about five to six months in Delaware and the balance of the year in Florida or Georgia. They are in effect half-time residents.

With the tremendous influx to Delaware of potato farmers from New York State, much land formerly devoted to other crops is now being planted to potatoes. Practically all the migrant farm camps I visited were potato farms and I am told the majority of farm work migrants are harvesting potatoes.

Housing

It is estimated that there are close to 150 labor camps in Delaware located on farms and canneries. The individual camp usually accommodates 10 to 100 migrants. The cannery housing I saw was larger and one farm unit visited in Staytonville accommodated well over 300 persons.

The condition of the housing visited was generally substandard and in a few cases extremely bad. Much of the housing we saw was single story cinder block construction. Units usually consisted of about 10 rooms, each about 7 by 9 feet with one window and one door. All had outdoor water and toilet facilities. Two units visited were converted ancient barns with improvised family cubicles of cardboard or burlap. Maintenance of accommodations varied from neatness and orderliness to disarray, dirt and confusion. In a number of the camps outdoor privies were within a few feet of the community water supply. To my knowledge there are no State or local statutes governing the quality and sanitary condition of housing, nor is there any supervision or inspection by health authorities.

In the current session of the Legislature a bill (S.438) has been introduced which would create a Department of Labor. The bill includes a provision for periodic inspection of migrant labor camps "in order to assure proper living conditions for the laborers and to provide for the health and education of their children". It also gives the proposed Labor Department authority to issue rules with regard to such camps. This bill passed the Senate on June 22 and was reported without recommendation in the House on June 27. Not much hope is held out for the passage of this measure due to the opposition of farmers in the state.

Some effort is made on the part of some canners and some farmers to maintain decent living conditions, however rudimentary. Canneries like the Draper Canning Company in Milton seemed to be endeavoring to carry out an enlightened housing program. Attitudes ranged from those of the enlightened employer with a concern and respect for his employees to those who regarded migrants as somewhat less than human. Some farmers complained that migrants did not respect improvements therefore why make any.

Mr. Bonk, plant manager at the Draper Canning Company, has in my opinion the kind of operation which should be commended. The firm employed two constables to maintain order in the camp and maintenance personnel to keep the camp grounds clean. Showers and a central cooking facility were also provided. Mr. Bonk reported that the company had plans to build a central recreation pavilion. He reported little or no trouble, and good relations with the migrant crew. This operation seemed to be the best of those visited.

Health Services

Prenatal, well baby, venereal disease and tuberculosis clinics are available free to the migrant population at established State Board of Health clinics being conducted for the general population; but these are not in close proximity to migrant camps and are little used. There is no organized medical care program especially for migrants.

Education

The State Department of Public Instruction accepts without question the children coming from migrant labor families. The Department reports that if the Visiting Teachers know of any such children not attending, they use the same means of persuasion to get them to attend as they do with children coming from permanently located families.

Welfare

Except for the activity of the Council of Churches discussed below there is no organized welfare activity on behalf of the migrants in the camps. For the migrant in need, public assistance can be granted pending the return of the migrant to his state of residence. When this cannot be determined he is eligible for assistance.

Child Welfare Services are available to the migrant; however, if placement in a foster home is necessary, the State Department of Welfare must first determine residence of the child. If he is found to be a resident of another state, an attempt is made to return the child to that state. The migrant child is eligible for services and care if residence cannot be determined.

Relations with the Community and Personal Conduct

Discussions with crew leaders indicated that migrants infrequently go to nearby towns, except to purchase food or clothing. Frequently all food buying is done by the crew leader on commission for the members of the crew. Little use seems to be made of community resources for recreation or other social activities. Music and dancing in the camps seemed to be the main source of recreation.

Farm operators report that crews vary in standards of conduct, but most farmers seem satisfied with having the crews located right on their farms, in some cases only a few yards from the farmhouse. The pattern seems to be that Negroes in a migrant crew do not mix with Negroes native to a town. Several crews had lay preachers who worked as members of the crews.

The large farm camp in Staytonville had a recreation hall and, when I arrived on a Saturday afternoon, a choir was earnestly practicing for a Sunday morning service. Several hundred yards away an active dice game was in progress. This picture seemed to indicate that generalizations regarding the conduct of the migrants in a community are as difficult as they are with residents. The vast majority of the migrants appear to be responsible citizens attempting to earn a living through the only channels available to them.

Upon arrival in one camp, I saw an elderly man giving a 12 year old boy a haircut with tender loving care. I learned that he was the boy's uncle and was getting him ready for his father to drive him all the way back to Florida that night, so that he might be at home on the opening day of school.

In another camp a 65 year old "free wheeler" told me that he was "a preacher and a God fearing man". His cabin was neatly kept and as he cooked his noonday meal he told me he had been in the migrant stream for 20 years. He could not find employment in any other occupation.

The Work of the Maryland-Delaware Council of Churches

The only program of direct service to migrants in the camps carried on in Delaware by any group is the "Migrant Ministry" of the Maryland-Delaware Council of Churches. Information on this program was obtained from the Rev. Jervis Cooke of Seaford, who serves as chairman of the Del-Mar Migrant Committee. The work carried on is part of the national migrant program of the National Council of Churches. Operating on a budget of \$7,500 a year, with the assistance of several part-time ministers, the Del-Mar Migrant Committee operates migrant day care centers in Hurlock and St. Michaels, Md. For the past four years a day center was operated at Cannon's cannery in Bridgeville, but no center was operated in 1955. With a station wagon called "The Harvester" the paid summer staff bring periodic religious services, counselling, movies, recreation programs, and toys to some of the camps in Delaware and Maryland.

It was my strong feeling that this work was only a drop in the bucket when compared with the tremendous need for this type of service. The Del-Mar Migrant Committee was doing a tremendous job without the broad support of most people in Delaware. Their tiny budget enabled them to only serve a tiny portion of the total need for this service.

The Overall Picture

One cannot take a trip visiting migrant camps in Delaware and not come away with the feeling that we have a serious problem in our midst unbeknownst to the vast majority of Delaware citizens. The repeated scenes of dirt, potential disease, inactivity in slack periods, scanty schooling, lack of recreation, lack of community support and understanding are almost overwhelming.

Some Problem Areas

1. Lack of any coordinated state-wide program to understand and meet problems of migrants.
2. Lack of information on the part of migrants concerning their own needs, their health, their education and welfare.
3. Lack of understanding on the part of professional workers and the community of the migrant, his background, the community's obligation toward him, and how that obligation might be met.
4. The lack of a good school experience for most migrant children. This poses special problems for our educators. According to a report of the National Council of Churches, six out of ten migrants are illiterate. Without special and concentrated effort these migrant children will have little chance to leave the migrant stream and the twilight zone of second class citizenship.

5. Lack of health services which will reach out and help the migrant where he is. Except in periods of emergency, migrants will probably not use central services that are available. Some type of field program seems indicated.
6. Lack of minimum housing standards in Delaware seems to be the most blatantly obvious problem. Minimum standards for housing and sanitation must be developed along with effective administration and enforcement.
7. Lack of a coordinated program of welfare services including day centers, counseling and financial assistance to migrants. Migrant agricultural workers contribute to the economy of the State and it would seem that welfare services should be equally available to migrants as to residents. Federal assistance may be necessary to assure this.

What is Happening Elsewhere

The U. S. Government through the President's Committee on Migratory Labor has been deeply concerned about migrants for several years. In 1954 a conference of the 10 states in the East Coast migratory stream was held in Washington. Delaware was represented by the State Departments of Health, Education, Welfare and Employment. That conference urged each state to take action to begin to study and develop programs to meet the problems outlined above. To date nine of thirteen east-coast states have developed active citizens' or governor's committees. Delaware has not as yet acted. In fact neither the departments of Health, Education, Employment or Welfare in Delaware have taken any initiative in this problem since the 1954 meeting. Mrs. Thomas Herlihy, Jr., Chairman of the State Labor Commission has been appointed by Governor Boggs as state liaison with the President's Commission on Migratory Labor.

What can the Welfare Council Do?

The pressing problems of migrant laborers in health, welfare and education point to the need for immediate citizen and social agency action to identify these problems and develop public opinion regarding needed services. It is recommended that the Welfare Council convene a meeting of the interested public and voluntary agencies, church and civic groups, farmers and canners, to form a statewide committee on migrants. It is suggested that the Welfare Council serve initially as the convener of the meeting and then take a position on such a committee as an interested agency.