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COMMUNITY HEALTH CARE *Directions*

The Hands that Feed Us

The Hardships and Care of the Migrant Farmworker

- Caroline Whitehead, Special Populations Program Coordinator

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Hands that Feed Us,

**North Carolina
Department
of Human Resources**

**Office of Rural
Health and Resource
Development**

North Carolina growers employ more than 300,000 farmworkers each year on a seasonal basis to help plant, tend, and harvest their crops. More than 45,000 of these seasonal farmworkers migrate into our state to provide the extra physical labor needed during the peak growing and harvesting seasons, typically May through October in the East, and through November in the West. This seasonal demand for outside labor is required for the successful harvesting of tobacco, sweet potatoes, apples, cucumbers, bell peppers, watermelons, Christmas trees, blueberries and other crops. Although the typical migrant farmworker is a single male in his twenties, many bring their spouses and children with them on the long trek from their home, usually in the citrus growing area of Florida where they may find work in the winter. They are eager to fill the back-breaking temporary jobs that most Americans now shun and are essential to our rural economy. Estimates from NC Cooperative Extension indicate that each farmworker in North Carolina generates approximately \$12,000 in profits for the agricultural industry in our state.

The road for the farmworker family is long and hard, and for most NC farmworkers that road begins in May. The average wages for one year are between \$7,000-9,000 per farmworker. This has to cover the added expense of moving several times per year in order to find farmwork. This lifestyle creates barriers to attaining even the basic necessities, such as education for children, affordable housing, and primary health care. The federal government addresses this interstate problem through grants to communities and states that have large numbers of farmworkers. North Carolina has the highest number of farmworkers of any state in the East with the exception of Florida.

In North Carolina, there are three communities that receive federal farmworker health funds (Hendersonville's Blue Ridge Health Services, Faison's Goshen Medical Center, and Newton Grove's Tri-County Community Health Center). The Office of Rural Health and Resource Development is funded to provide services through several contract sites, including Nash Regional Migrant Health Center in Strickland's Crossroads. The other sites include health departments and

health centers in areas with a high need for seasonal labor. Nationally, it is estimated that only 12% of farmworkers receive care through the migrant and seasonal farmworker health program each year.

The state government also provides limited funds (through the Division of Adult Health, DEHNR) to reimburse private physicians, pharmacists, dentists, and hospitals who care for sick migrant farmworkers. This requires a co-pay from the farmworkers for all services and is capped at \$150 per claim. These measures were taken in 1995 in order to extend the funds throughout the year, instead of having them depleted prior to the completion of the harvesting season as has been the case in most years.

The NC Primary Health Care Association provides a variety of services to facilitate the provision of care to migrant and seasonal farmworkers. These services include training for health care providers, information and referral, and some patient education materials. They also sponsor an annual meeting for all providers on the East Coast to discuss farmworker health issues and house the Eastern Stream Coordinator.



A typical day for a farmworker in Sampson County

The NC Farmworker Health Alliance is a joint initiative of the NC Primary Health Care Association, the Division of Adult Health, and the Office of Rural Health and Resource Development and believes that migrant and seasonal farmworkers deserve to have access to basic health services. More than 30 organizations work together to address the health care gaps that farmworkers face. We welcome ideas and inquiries about serving farmworkers in North Carolina.

For further information, contact Caroline Whitehead, Special Populations Program Coordinator at the Office of Rural Health and Resource Development (919)733-2040.

Hands that Feed Us

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Farmwork is one of the most dangerous occupations in the United States. Although agricultural workers account for only 3% of the workforce, they account for 14% of work-related deaths. Farmworkers suffer the highest rates of occupational injuries and illness in the country. Common occupational illnesses include green tobacco sickness, heat exhaustion, back strain, pesticide exposure, and contact dermatitis.

Because growers must tend and harvest their crops on a tight schedule, workers in agriculture spend long hours in the fields and often six to seven days per week during peak harvest. Work hours and lack of transportation make it difficult for most farmworkers to get to health care when they are sick. And a large number of farmworkers have never seen a dentist and know little about preventive oral health. Pregnant women often arrive in North Carolina without any prenatal care and are without means to get to the nearest clinic. Infants and children have often never received any well-child checkups and are behind on their immunizations.

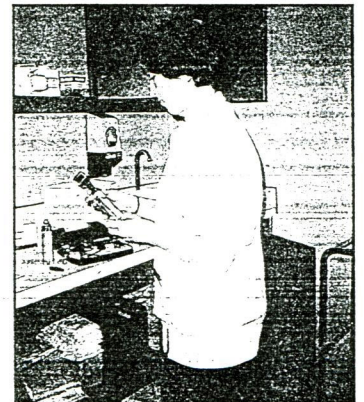
These situations stem from several factors. Most farmworkers have no telephone because they are usually housed near the fields where they work, typically many miles from any health provider's office. Most farmworkers cannot afford to own a car. They must pay, typically their crewleader, for the drive from Florida or where they last worked. Farmworkers are extremely isolated, especially women who are pregnant or who are caring for children. Often they are the only women on an entire camp and are left alone all day every day. If they are young, or have recently come from another country, they probably know little about the need for preventive health measures, such as early prenatal care or how to avoid communicable disease.

Approximately 90% of farmworkers who migrate to North Carolina are native Spanish speakers, typically from Mexico

and Central America. Many come fleeing economic hardship and political turmoil, from rural areas where schools are usually available only through the sixth grade.

State growers say migrant farmworkers are among the hardest working group of people they have ever known. Most want to learn English, though finding a class that is available after typical farmwork hours or on weekends can be extremely difficult. In addition, many are unable to read or write in their own language, having had to leave school by the third or fourth grade to help their parents in the fields. Language barriers present problems to farmworkers when they are sick and must receive care. To combat this, many health centers, health departments, and hospitals are hiring interpreters to serve the increasing number of Hispanics (most are non-farmworkers) moving to our state year round. For health providers who accept reimbursement through the fee-for-service program, there is a toll-free translation line (1-800-255-8755), which is available Monday - Friday, 9:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m.

We welcome inquiries about how you can participate in the growing group of providers who have chosen to care for the needs of farmworker families, who are critical members of our rural economy.



Sandra Glover, RN, prepares the Nash County Regional Migrant Center for the coming season.