

Meeting the Challenge



Providing Migrant Farmworker Housing

By Norma C. López

There is a housing crisis in rural communities throughout the country which worsens each year when migrant farmworkers, often with their families, arrive to work in agricultural jobs. Migrant farmworkers who are contracted in homebases such as Texas or Florida to work in other states can sometimes count on grower-provided housing, which varies widely in quality. Many families must rely on rural rental markets that do not meet the housing demand created by the influx of migrant workers. As a result, many migrant farmworkers suffer, often paying extremely high rents, in dilapidated, overcrowded, and unsanitary housing. Others who are not as lucky live in barns, cars and other makeshift housing.



Housing affordability is an enormous problem for most migrant farmworkers. According to the National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS) in 1989, two-thirds of migrant farmworkers lived below the poverty line. The annual median income of a migrant farmworker is \$5,000. Because farm work is seasonal, migrant laborers are only able to work an average of 29 weeks per year. For most



This cabin, one of sixty in the Campo Azul farm labor camp in Oregon, is nearly fifty years old and has no running water or heat. It is not unusual to see up to eight people living in each cabin.

farmworkers, paying below 30 percent of gross annual income for rent, a guideline set by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, is an unattainable goal unless they share a dwelling with others. Many do share, often leading to severe overcrowding. Farmworkers not lucky enough to obtain grower-provided or subsidized housing spend a large portion of their earnings on housing or live in deplorable conditions. For migrant farmworkers finding housing in the rental market is a challenge, especially when they are new to the area. According to nonprofit housing providers in Delaware, Wisconsin and Oregon, migrant farm-

workers face considerable obstacles including excessive rent, substantial deposit amounts, long-term leases, lack of credit and discrimination.

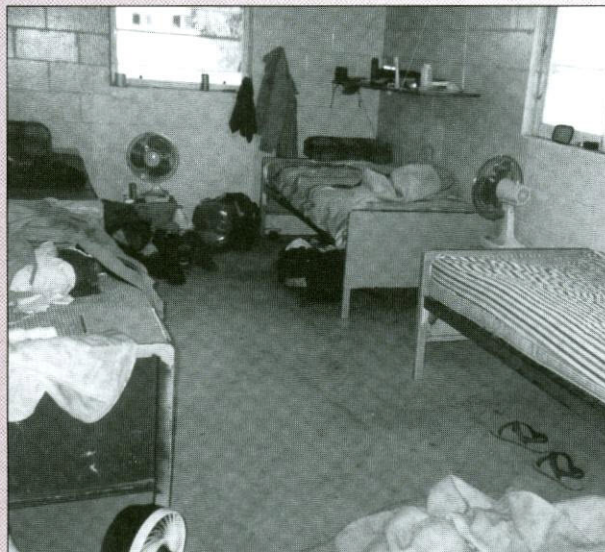


There are countless accounts of the deplorable housing conditions in which farmworkers live. One man in Hillsboro, Oregon described a situation in which 11 farmworkers shared a one-bedroom trailer. Every night the men and women who lived there competed for sleeping space. The last one to come in for the night would have to sleep by the door steps.

Besides overcrowding, the quality of farmworkers' housing is often severely poor. In Beaver Dam, Wisconsin some migrant farmworkers resort to renting dilapidated trailers infested with vermin. A United Migrant Opportunity Services (UMOS) employee reported that a child became ill after cockroaches crawled into his nose and ears. These living conditions are not isolated. They persist around the country.



Response to this crisis has been limited. Most growers cannot or prefer not to take the responsi-



This two-room unit at the Taylor and Fulton Camp in Mappsville, Virginia, houses up to twelve people.

bility of providing housing, leaving farmworkers to fend for themselves. At the federal level the only programs providing housing specifically for farmworkers are the Rural Housing and Community Development Service (RHCDS) Section 514/516 programs. These programs provide loans to growers and loans and grants to nonprofit sponsors of farmworker housing. However, the amount of funds available for fiscal year 1995 was only a little over \$26 million, eight times less than the amount demanded by groups attempting to develop farmworker housing. In fiscal year 1995, there are only enough funds to provide 550 units of farmworker housing, a grossly inadequate amount compared to the long term national demand for migrant farmworker housing. According to an unpublished study prepared in 1980 for the Farmers Home Administration, 756,196 units were needed to meet the demand for migrant farmworker housing.



Most states and local governments have not taken action to address this overwhelming problem. However, some states where farmworker labor is essential to the agricultural industry have taken steps to create housing opportunities.¹ Oregon has created a state farmworker housing tax credit that gives growers an incentive to provide farmworker housing. Unfortunately, budget constraints have led the legislature to reduce Oregon's farmworker housing tax credit from 50 to 30 percent at the beginning of 1996. Wisconsin is also in the process of finding solutions to the farmworker housing need. It has established a Migrant Housing Task Force, which is examining the feasibility of establishing a farmworker tax credit program and other ways to provide affordable farmworker housing.

Although the problem seems overwhelming, there is hope. Throughout the country nonprofit organizations concerned with the welfare of migrant farmworkers attempt to provide housing.

¹ See HAC's publication, *Who Will House Farmworkers: An Update on State and Federal Programs*, for more details on state actions.



This family of six, two adults and four children, pays \$200 monthly for a cabin in Campo Azul. The head of the household indicated that this was the only affordable housing in the area.

For example, in the Delmarva Peninsula of Delaware, Maryland and Virginia, Delmarva Rural Ministries Inc. offers services to meet the needs of migrant farmworkers. It decided to build farmworker housing when it saw that no one was meeting the overwhelming need in the area. In cooperation with NCALL Research, Inc., a regional technical assistance provider, Delmarva has developed 32 units of migrant housing in Delaware and Maryland. It is in the preplanning stages of the first Rural Economic and Community Development (an agency of the U.S. Department of Agriculture) project in Virginia's Eastern Shore. Debra Singletary, Executive Director of Delmarva Rural Ministries, explained that the Virginia Eastern Shore is "a hard nut to crack" in terms of developing farmworker housing. In addition to the lack of funding sources, strong "not in my backyard" (NIMBY) sentiments,² zoning laws prohibit-

ing multifamily housing projects, and lack of infrastructure have contributed to the delay in developing housing in this area.



However, Delmarva Rural Ministries is encouraged in its mission to provide migrant farmworker housing by its positive experiences. Its first project proved to be incredibly successful. The Leonard Apartments project in Salisbury, Maryland was completed in 1989. It is a 34-unit project developed and owned by Delmarva Rural Ministries in cooperation with technical assistance provided by NCALL Research, Inc. Eighteen units are reserved for year-round farmworkers; the remaining 16 units are set aside for migrant farmworkers.



This exemplary project rents to both unaccompanied workers and families, an unusual occurrence because most housing managers are wary of placing these two groups in the same facilities. Often there is the perception that unaccompanied men's behavior is not compatible with family life. Although some minor problems still occur, Leonard Apartments achieves a level of harmony that can be sensed by talking to the tenants and the property manager. Problems include tenants not knowing how to operate appliances in the apartments or equipment in the common areas. Among the more difficult problems, at first, was the habit of unaccompanied men sending all their money to their permanent homes without setting aside money to pay rent.



According to the property manager, the key to maintaining a successful farm labor complex is to provide education also on simple procedures that most people take for granted, like how to operate a washer or dryer, or how to manage a budget so

² Refer to HAC's publication, *Overcoming Exclusion in Rural Communities: NIMBY Case Studies*, for a detailed account of a NIMBY struggle related to farmworker housing. This report gives details about individual projects only and does not focus exclusively on farmworker housing.



A new unit at the Aurora Center offers two bedrooms, a kitchen and bathroom.

that enough money is left to pay rent and other pressing needs after sending some money back home. A well-managed site, she said, requires the manager to inform workers about the expectations and responsibilities they incur when signing a lease. Delmarva Rural Ministries staff expressed great satisfaction with the management company's choice of a property manager. She has a special role that requires her to balance strict application of the rules and understanding and sensitivity to the concerns of migrant farmworkers. Leonard Apartments offers leases on a monthly and weekly basis to accommodate the short-term occupancy needs of migrant farmworkers.



A key component in the successful operation of Leonard Apartments is the property management company's ability to create a sense of community by providing organized activities for the tenants. Soccer games or cookouts take place on weekends. Events to promote better understanding between the community and the farmworkers are also organized. For example, it was known that many tenants were afraid of the police so the property management company organized a cook-

out and invited the neighborhood officers. Playground and soccer equipment is also provided. This simple recreational equipment not only entertains the tenants but plays a significant role in fostering a sense of community and belonging.



Another example of successful housing for farmworkers is the Aurora Center in Berlin, Wisconsin, built by UMOs. The Aurora Center has 32 units of farmworker housing that are used as emergency shelter for migrant farmworkers. Each housing unit has two bedrooms, a kitchen, and a dining area; the 16 newest units also have bathrooms. Common laundry facilities exist and a UMOs service office providing social services and job referrals is on site. The Aurora Center houses unaccompanied men and families. However, most of the tenants are families.



UMOs staff found ways to reduce the development costs by implementing novel solutions. Many of the Aurora Housing Center's innovations had never been tried before with RHCDS-funded housing; therefore, the project sponsors requested many exceptions to the regulations. For example, the septic system used in the Aurora Center project consists of holding tanks emptied every two months. To avoid the prohibitive costs of air conditioning in the summer months, project designers devised ceiling exhaust fans. Wall paneling is made of Kemply, an inexpensive durable material used in freezers, college dorms, mobile homes, and portable offices.



Housing Development Corporation (HDC) has been building quality farmworker housing for the past 13 years in Washington County, Oregon. Last year it hired its first executive director. Nevertheless, it has developed 91 units of affordable farmworker housing. Elm Park Apartments in Hillsboro, Oregon is a 32-unit project that is

clean, safe, and affordable. Unfortunately, there is not enough of this quality housing. As of July 1995, the waiting list for this facility had 160 families. According to HDC staff, HDC is the only nonprofit housing organization developing farmworker housing in Washington County. Since the population of farmworkers and dependents increases to 20,000 during the peak season, HDC faces a great challenge.



Often, behind decent and affordable housing there are years of struggle for the nonprofit and interested individuals. Nonprofits face enormous constraints in developing farmworker housing. The greatest obstacle is packaging financially viable arrangements with low incomes and short occupancy periods of migrant farmworkers. Nonprofit organizations agree that it would be almost impossible to develop farmworker housing projects without RHCDS funds.



Funding shortages, land acquisition difficulty, zoning laws prohibiting multifamily projects, community opposition to farm labor housing, lack of public water and sewer, and lack of nonprofit

capacity are some of the hurdles nonprofit organizations face in their endeavors. In the face of these constraints, many nonprofits and local governments are unwilling to sponsor farm labor housing projects. Even within the network of low-income housing developers, there are only a few organizations that choose to develop farmworker housing.



However, for nonprofits that choose to develop farmworker housing, the efforts are worthwhile and the results are impressive. Section 514/516 housing visited in Maryland, Delaware, Wisconsin and Oregon by this writer is clean, decent, safe, and affordable. Excellent farmworker housing, although not abundant, does exist thanks to committed individuals, responsible growers, nonprofit organizations and responsive government agencies. Nonprofits dedicating their time to this endeavor should be proud of their accomplishments. Sometimes, they are the only ones who care enough about providing decent affordable housing to the migrant farmworkers who ensure our inexpensive and abundant food supply. ♦

Norma C. López is Special Projects Coordinator for the Housing Assistance Council.



Migrant farmworkers waiting for UMOs staff at the Aurora Center in Berlin, Wisconsin. The center, developed with RECD funds, has 32 units of emergency shelter for migrant farmworkers.