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CHILDREN OF FAMILIES WHO FOLLOW THE CROPS -- A  
RESPONSIBILITY FOR PUBLIC HEALTH

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## INTRODUCTION

Families who follow the crops remain today among the most deprived segments in American life. Discrimination and poverty force them into a wandering, degrading existence which perpetuates disease and ignorance. The style of life of migrant families levies an inevitable toll on their children. They live in shacks and fringe rural slums or in temporary labor camps and spend much of their lives in dangerous jalopies and trucks. They are deprived of adequate schooling and a sense of belonging and acceptance in the communities through which they pass.<sup>1,2,3,4</sup> But perhaps most depressing of all, most of these children never obtain the minimum of education needed to prepare them for any other way of life. Thus, the destitution of the migratory family perpetuates itself and creates a culture of poverty marked by lack of self-respect and blunting of aspirations to live a more rewarding life.

What is the legitimate concern for these families, particularly these children on the part of the public health profession? Public health tradition has always held that health can only be understood and protected when considered in the total context of how one lives. Can we ever improve the migrant child's well-being if we continue to restrict our vision to matters of personal health per se?<sup>2,4</sup> Can we ignore a so-called way of life that offers dangerous living facilities, incomplete basic education, inadequate medical care, grossly inadequate employment and remuneration wherewith to purchase the simplest necessities? Can we continue to

ignore the discrimination directed against migrants and the sizeable ethnic minority groups in their midst?

Traditional, separately focused health services, educative, preventive, or therapeutic directed at migrant groups, jurisdiction by jurisdiction, have not solved the health problems resulting from itinerancy. Immunizations, skin tests, child health conferences, nutrition pamphlets are not the answer even though proposals for such seem to constitute the main contributions from public health to date.<sup>3,4</sup> Similarly in education or housing the piecemeal attacks seem neither to have solved or even offered hopes for solution of the major deficiencies.<sup>5,6</sup> Migrancy is antithetical to any kind of ordered living, to normal growth and development, physical and emotional health. Even if it did not discourage, migrancy allows little time or opportunity to seek out or utilize social amenities such as health knowledge or health services.

The public health profession has talked about migrancy for many years. The profession's failure to utilize the recently available federal funds<sup>7</sup> for setting up migrant health services indicates its awareness of the impossibility of significantly upgrading the well-being of ignorant and poor persons, who bounce from jurisdiction to jurisdiction for unpredictable stays, through intervention limited to health services. At the same time, by its failure to initiate a more creative and significant effort to correct

the underlying reasons for the migrant way of life, public health continues in default of its responsibility for the well-being of an important and sizeable segment of our children and our society.

The basic question must be faced head-on. Does migrancy allow equal or reasonable access to health knowledge and well-being, two of the priceless fruits of our democracy?

#### AGRICULTURAL MIGRANCY TODAY

##### Numbers and Patterns:

Of the estimated two million seasonal domestic agricultural workers in the United States approximately one-half million are migrants. Included in the latter are some 75,000 working dependents. There are another 125,000 non-working dependents who migrate and some 200,000 who stay home.<sup>3</sup> Migrant numbers have not varied significantly over the past ten years and every source of information indicates the likelihood of a continued demand for their services. This results from the gradual disappearance of the smaller family or self-sufficient farms under the pressures of industrialized agriculture, from technologic advancements which result in larger aggregates of similar crops with shorter peaks and larger labor needs, and the unrelatedness of sources of labor to newer irrigated lands and specialized crops. Even where climate would permit great diversification, growing is done in a way that produces short, steep peaks of labor demand. Mechanization has changed the overall harvest needs only modestly and will continue to do so

irregularly and slowly.<sup>8</sup>

The migrant work force is made up to a large extent of farm workers displaced from family farms and share cropping ventures, and is heavy with workers of minority ethnic groups from the South and Southwest. They become migrants, migrate not from choice but because of lack of skill, poor education, racial discrimination and limited opportunity in their home areas. The migrant work force undergoes almost continuous change. A good many drop out for employment outside of agriculture where wages and work conditions offer more.

There is no single travel pattern. Some follow a schedule, returning yearly to certain crops and farms, others trust to luck or follow employment notices. Some specialize or go out on the road for several different seasons. Some make short jumps, others go cross-country. These apparently random moves are in part made in response to individual needs, compulsions, desires for housing accommodations, lower cost of living, schooling opportunities or ability to stay with friends and relatives to keep down expenses. Out of this welter of drives and plans there are five major distinguishable travel patterns accounting for the majority of migrants:<sup>3</sup>

1. East Coast - 50,000 workers starting in Florida in winter and ending in New England in the summer, heavily Negro.

2. Sugar beets and fruit - 75,000 workers starting in Texas in April, going to North Central Mountains and ending in Pacific Northwest in fall, heavily Mexican.
3. Southwest cotton - 100,000 workers starting in Texas in July and flowing westward through the fall, heavily Negro and Mexican.
4. Western states - 100,000 workers moving up and down the Pacific states in a complex pattern.
5. Wheat and small grain - 50,000 workers beginning in Texas in the early summer and ending in North Central states and Canada in the fall, mostly male crews without families.

Income:

In spite of government attempts to assist in placement of workers, and a voluntary inter-state Annual Worker Plan,<sup>9</sup> the uncertainties of both harvest and labor supply leave the migrant with little chance for a financially successful year. Weather, unexpected use of imported labor, need to pay his own transportation, generally non-specific employment notices, find the migrant depending primarily on word-of-mouth for his next job.

Migrants are paid hourly or on a piece rate basis. Although they earn sizeable sums for brief periods the only meaningful index is their annual wage. In 1961 the average seasonal farm worker

found 134 days of work and earned \$912. This is an average of little more than \$18. per week (compared with \$93. a week earned by factory workers that year) and these earnings are lowered by rather sizeable transportation costs paid for by himself. Migrant workers remain the most disadvantaged element of the American work force. They do not, for example, enjoy minimum wages and hours, formal collective bargaining, protection of child labor, unemployment insurance, sick leave, paid vacations, pensions and other fringe benefits long since taken for granted by most industrial workers.<sup>10, 11</sup>

It is not rare for crew leaders and others to misrepresent opportunities and wages, to collect percentages from employers and employees alike, collect for travel expenses, take fees for services rendered by public agencies, charge higher prices, or pocket social security deductions.<sup>12</sup> Legislation to avoid these abuses has had a generally inadequate and unclear effect.

#### Education:

The migrant's unschooledness is proverbial,<sup>13</sup> but his children today represent the most educationally deprived group of future citizens in our nation.<sup>14</sup> The majority never attain the education necessary to participate effectively in our society. Because of economic deprivation, late school entry and fewer days attendance, migrant children display greater retardation and less progress, drop out earlier and supply a large reservoir of illiterates to

our population. The migrant child may also find himself deprived by reason of language and minority group identification. Poor parental motivation offers no counterbalance.<sup>15</sup> Nationwide surveys have demonstrated that enforcement of school attendance is infrequent, and that as many as 20 percent do not attend school at all.

Where schooling is offered there is little understanding of special needs. Cultural and deprivational barriers leave a child's learning so spotty that he typically does not fit into any of the graded classes. Short term demands on schools caused by migrant children stopping over for only a few weeks, and crop demands on the children's time all detract from the already pitiful educational opportunities.

#### Housing and Sanitation:

Of the many problems faced by the farm migrant family none is more pressing or persistent than the inadequacy of his housing. Legislation has thus far failed to be seriously concerned or meet the needs. The obvious hazard of ramshackle housing is a major cause of the serious health problems and accidents that afflict the migratory farm citizen. Rundown labor camps and rural fringe slums share the same characteristics. Buildings, if any, are overcrowded, dilapidated and structurally dangerous. Many are without running water or adequate toilet facilities even in the vicinity, and sewage and garbage disposal are infrequently to be found. Even keeping oneself reasonably clean is a near impossibility.



Credit available for housing is repeatedly revealed as not being the critical factor.<sup>16</sup> No matter how financed, a building occupied for only a month or two each year assumes a staggering cost that precludes availability. Can one logically foresee a dozen adequate structures each standing idle for eleven months so that a migrant family can have reasonable housing on its yearlong rounds?

#### Transiency, Statelessness, Ineligibility:

Because they are or soon become non-residents in most areas in which they work, and because only a small proportion can acquire a home or even a permanent address, migrants are yearlong deprived of many services ordinarily available to local families.<sup>17</sup> In instances of abuse or neglect there are few counseling, adoption, child care or medical services available to children of migrant farm workers. Few day-care centers exist. Unattached teen-agers are found in labor camps without supervision or protection.<sup>18</sup> Integration into the life of the community through which the migrant child passes rarely occurs and he is thereby deprived of the important experience of living, playing, or working with children better prepared to succeed in our society.

Of equal import is the actual shunning of the migrant by each community he touches. Community fears of his becoming a permanent dependent, individual fears of the migrant's frequently minority ethnic appearance, evidence of roughness, dirt, poverty and

ignorance - perhaps some element of not wanting to see his distress when his services are so critically needed - serve to isolate him quite brutally and frankly.<sup>18, 19</sup> Perceiving the larger society in this fashion he loses any desire to join it.

#### Health and Welfare:

The health of migrant children has been shown to compare unfavorably with the health of the rest of the population. The group has a high infant mortality rate,<sup>3, 18</sup> a high rate of premature birth, and a high rate of death from diarrhea, respiratory disease and accidents. Immunization status and medical supervision are rarely adequate. Malnutrition, uncorrected eye, ear and birth defects, skin disease and many other manifestations of deprivation are present in excess. Tuberculosis rates among this population are reminiscent of the 1890's.

While on the road migrant children are exposed to the dangers of traveling in old cars, trucks or buses without adequate rest, food or hygienic facilities. Their environment within the labor camp or fringe community suggests the worst city slum. Most camps are ill equipped to contend with their needs as children. Frequently they sleep in overcrowded, unventilated rooms, live in shacks which have no running water or toilets and afford poor protection against wind, rain and cold. Accidents from uncleared snags, broken glass, nails and from fire occur continuously. Their diet is often inadequate for growing children. While their parents are working,

they may be found playing unsupervised in roadways, near irrigation ditches, in the fields near heavy machinery, or in camp lots littered with junk and garbage. At times they are supervised by older brothers and sisters who must be kept out of school for this purpose.<sup>20</sup> Seldom do they have access to a playground, play equipment or a supervised recreation program.

Agricultural labor is itself a hazardous occupation with the accident death rate the second highest of any occupation, exceeded only by mining. One quarter of all workers killed on the job are farm workers. The greatest causes of death are farm machinery, followed by drowning and exposure to agricultural chemicals. The largest proportion of farm accidents involve younger people, as is the case in non-farm industry. Over a third of the farm people killed in accidents are under 25 years of age.

#### Effects of Imported Labor:

For many years an assumption has been made that domestic farm labor resources are inevitably scarce. The coming halt in the flow of Braceros is a good reason to review their impact on domestic migrancy.<sup>21</sup>

Before the institution of the Bracero program, domestic workers did accomplish all kinds of harvest work. Stoop labor was indeed done by domestic workers, many of whom are still living in the fringe slum areas of agricultural communities. The year the Bracero system was instituted, the California Department of

Employment estimated that there were 600,000 persons who did farm work for wages during the year. In 1962 there were 70,000 Braceros in the same state at the peak of the season with only 350,000 domestic workers.

Ease of arranging for Braceros on a few days notice to work on contract just long enough to bring in the harvest has made the Braceros popular with the growers. The simplicity of planning for housing and feeding a rather docile group of men without families is also attractive. Moreover, they can be removed at a moment's notice and no one need fear their remaining as an unemployed burden on the community once the season is over.

Matching the stability offered by the delivered Braceros to short-peak operations can be accomplished by domestic farm laborers only through a formalized and effective nationwide farm employment program. To date, the native migrant has been a poor second choice, feared as a potential settler, unfavorably compared with the Bracero and given poorer living conditions as well.<sup>5</sup> He is forced to compete with a worker from a less developed country who can with even small savings from his U.S. seasonal work, live "well" in his own community with low standards and comparably low costs.

The continued presence of such foreign workers who are regularly given advantages which far exceed those available to the domestic farm labor force has, over the years, disheartened, demoralized and scattered the domestic labor market.

### The Overall Outlook:

The migrant worker is still underemployed and poorly paid, subject to the vagaries of harvest, destined to a meager, wandering existence among dilapidated slums replete with hazards of injury and disease. Job security, fringe benefits, all of the accepted industrial worker benefits are denied him in his grim struggle to survive here and now. He is without a voice and is seldom reached even by helping hands.<sup>22</sup> He is a perennial stranger to his employer, an enemy or ignored in the towns through which he passes. Even more importantly, every aspect of his life leaves its mark on his children whose inadequate exposure to life and schooling set them up as lifelong burdens to our society. In a word, poverty is the constant self-perpetuating companion of the migrant family. Although he fulfills a crucial function in our society no one has seen fit to tackle, as a whole, the problems of the domestic migrant's way of life.<sup>5</sup> His contribution to the general welfare is ignored and even maligned in a complex agricultural economy best known for productivity, surplus, protective tariff, privileged land assessment, subsidy and until now a foreign labor supply guaranteed promptly available for delivery by government.

Why we may ask, does he continue to live such a life? Not, you can be sure because he wants to, if our surveys of his beliefs and desires carry any clues.<sup>18</sup> He would tomorrow, if he could, pick a home and settle down, and in fact, each year a goodly number

succeed. The migrant worker is not attracted to migrant farm work, he does it rather because he has to. He has not become poor only from working on the farm, he works there because he is already poor, and working there can expect to stay poor. Unless something more is done than this country has been able to accomplish until now, the migrant and his children can look forward to few opportunities or improvements. In fact, replacements to the migrant stream come from the presently uneconomic family farms whose worsening plight often adds confusion to the whole farm labor situation and whose economic status is falsely pitted against the migrants whose ranks many of these small farmers are about to join.

#### WHAT CAN AND MUST BE DONE

So far there has been no framework or plan which has guaranteed growers the necessary domestic workers for their peak harvest, let alone for their pre or post-peak needs -- none which has offered workers minimal amenities, freedom from dependency and perpetuation of their kind of unskilled army; none which has offered the citizens and communities of our country freedom from the armies of illiterates, dependents and part-time unskilled workers that migrancy produces.

A National Presidentially Appointed Task Force:

With termination of the Bracero program in the offing, the time has come, we believe, for the President to appoint a National Task Force on Migrant Agricultural Labor. Such a Task Force would

acknowledge publicly that migrancy and seasonal labor is an urgent national problem which requires national leadership to resolve. Such a Task Force should consist of distinguished private citizens and include those who are acknowledged leaders from the fields of agricultural economy and labor as well as from other industries. It must take into account that migrants cannot, by themselves, change a role thrust on them; that agriculture as an industry cannot, by itself, improve this situation; that communities, cities and counties cannot provide suitable services or facilities for a few weeks or months out of each year where migrants winter-over or work in significant numbers; that one state with significant numbers of migrants cannot individually solve problems when workers are only part-time residents nor can its farm industry be competitive if reasonable standards are instituted in that one state alone.

Once created, a Presidential Task Force might well proceed with the following charges:

1. Rapidly assemble and summarize (two or three months) the amply available knowledge on extent, diversity, unmet needs of domestic migrant workers and their relation to other seasonal workers available locally. Plan how each major crop area can meet its labor supply without an imported work force.

2. Review with domestic migrants and farmers their feelings, beliefs and outlooks about the future of agricultural labor in the United States.
3. Review similarly with local and state officials the individual problems and needs of those home-base communities in which seasonal workers 'reside' as well as those through which they migrate while following the crops.
4. Create national understanding for migrants and their children as human beings and develop concern for their needs as well as for their services.
5. Seek out and point up the underlying mutuality of interest of farmers, labor, workers, consumers and citizenry at large in staking migrants and their children to a fair share of what America has to offer.
6. Popularize the suggested solutions through all media and also by working with all groups offering a forum for discussion of such activities. Involve parents' groups, church councils, women's clubs, etc., all of which have expressed an interest and worked in this field, to more rapidly bring reality to the Task Force goals.



7. Set up one or more prototypes of the kinds of activity suggested so that their purpose and effectiveness can be tested and their practicality made a fact.
8. Encourage formation of and work with task forces of states which have significant migrant populations. State task forces can serve as the means of bringing to a focus the interests of each state in accomplishing a fair part of a national plan. Their interrelationships with the National Task Force can serve to eliminate hopelessly parochial schemes which might otherwise find state pitted against state.
9. Serve as a non-partisan source of inspiration and integrity which state and local groups will feel obliged to emulate and assist.

A Suggested New Direction:

To point out that there are probably many useful courses that can be followed, one broad gauge direction is offered to the Task Force. Its thesis is that enforced migrancy is not compatible with health, general well-being, or with our democratic society; that it need not be continued; that all the goals to be set with, for and by agricultural labor can be better met at a lesser cost to all through stabilization of work in agriculture

as is done in any other industry.

A national plan can be constructed to provide for minimum wages, services, housing, education, so that no one region or segment of agriculture or labor is economically disadvantaged.

Basically such a plan should:

1. Phase out the need for nearly all domestic migrants within 10 years.
2. Phase out all imported farm laborers within one year so that all parties know exactly where they stand in regard to this threatened on-again, off-again labor source.
3. Stabilize present migrants in agricultural centers where by commuting to and from work daily they can be employed eight or more months per year. Thus, they can acquire residency, belong to their communities and keep their children at home and at school during the school year as all other American citizens do. This plan may involve provision of Federal subsidy to these communities to provide low cost housing (private or public), adequate schools, medical and other services until agricultural labor becomes self-supporting and contributes sufficiently to local taxes as does any other industrial work force.<sup>12</sup>

(The Giannini Foundation of the University of

California estimates that the workdays of Kern County farm labor could be increased 35 days per year without any changes in crop practices simply by intensified efforts to bring workers and jobs together in a rational pattern.)

4. Provide for a supplemental agricultural work force of teen-agers, students, young adults and others from communities along the present migrant routes to cover peak needs. These persons will not be forced into migrancy as a way of life, rather will have a healthful, profitable work experience for a few years or for a few months each year. Recruitment, hiring halls, standardized adequate remuneration and benefits must be achieved.
5. If a mobile agricultural work force is required for some crops or some areas, plan, as is done in construction or the armed forces, for a truly mobile work army. Since state boundaries are often crossed and crops are typically short, arrange for mobile, federally provided, rented or long-term purchase housing, mobile multigraded schools, mobile health services if necessary arrangements cannot be made locally, and provide subsidies for communities

which will have special burdens of "parking" the mobile communities during winter and other slack time periods.

6. Encourage diversification of crops and longer employment seasons so that a smaller work force can be gainfully employed for the best part of the year in areas where climate permits.

#### CONCLUSION

Is it not, above all, a challenge to professionals in Maternal and Child Health to lead the way in behalf of organized public health to effect those changes in agricultural labor without which migrancy will continue and migrant children cannot possibly hope to attain a reasonable modicum of well-being? We urge each of you to give consideration to the attached resolution which should be acted upon by our association. By its adoption we will make clear that public health is also interested in the health of migrant children and is aware that little of lasting significance can be done to improve the well-being of children of migrants if they are to continue in a way of life characterized by destitution, deprivation and illiteracy.

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THE AGRICULTURAL MIGRANT: PROPOSAL FOR APHA ACTION

WHEREAS there are sizeable numbers of migrant agricultural laborers coming from and utilized in many of our states, and

there is every likelihood that the demands for farm labor will continue to occur in peaks and spurts beyond local capacity to provide a work force, and

there is small likelihood under present conditions that the migrant will achieve reasonable periods of employment and substantial remuneration annually with which to purchase even basic necessities, and

the very nature of migrant labor has precluded provision of adequate basic education for the children who can in turn look forward to no better opportunities, and

the migrant way of life continues to offer degrading and dangerous housing and unhealthful general living conditions, and

migrancy enforces statelessness, inaccessibility and ineligibility for many of our societies' benefits available to all other citizens, and

migrants are frequently feared, shunned and isolated by the communities through which they pass, and

the health and well-being of agricultural migrants has been shown repeatedly to be well below acceptable levels, and

the competition offered by labor imported from countries with lower standards of living has served to further depress wages and the domestic farm labor force opportunities for work and thus its standard of living and health, and

without a major national breakthrough there seems very little possibility of significant general improvement of domestic migrant labor's health and well-being.

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED: That the APHA recognizes that migrant labor health and well-being cannot of itself be improved without giving general consideration to the migrant way of life, and

that the APHA calls for a Presidentially appointed National Task Force on Migrant Agricultural Labor to provide national leadership to:

1. resolve the problems of migrancy and seasonal farm labor
2. review and organize knowledge about the problem
3. create understanding that migrancy is a national problem bigger than any one area, group or industry can solve by itself
4. review general feelings and beliefs of labor, agriculture and the heavily involved communities about the problem
5. create national concern for migrants as humans and as citizens
6. create a solution that will, within one year, do away with need for all labor imports, and within ten years, for the need of essentially all domestic farm workers to migrate, and
7. work with, involve and create practical concern among the many large and influential citizen groups who are anxious to participate in ways of improving the lot of farm labor, and
8. set up prototypes of the kinds of stable, dependable labor forces that can be utilized and which will earn and have benefits comparable to those available to other American industrial workers, and be it further resolved

that the APHA assign to the appropriate committee and officers the responsibility of doing everything in their power to help create such a National Task Force, and

that the APHA express and demonstrate its desire to assist such a National Task Force in every way, and

that the APHA inform and urge its members to support the formation of such a National Task Force, and

that the APHA inform and urge state and local health officers to utilize fully, in the interim, health funds now available for migrants and seek appropriate solutions to problems of residency requirements which often drastically curtail available health and welfare resources.