

Vermont Migrant Dairy Farmworker Housing Brief

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Vermont farms depend on migrant labor. Fruit and vegetable farms are able to hire seasonal foreign migrant labor through the H2A visa program. This option is not available for dairy farms, which are year-round operations excluded from the H2A program and for whom there is no alternative that would enable them to meet labor shortages through a visa program. Farmworker housing, a perennial challenge in US agriculture, is made more difficult for migrant dairy farmworkers because migrant workers face risks from immigration enforcement when they travel off the farm, and because without the farmworker housing inspections associated with a legal visa program, such as those required as part of the H2A visa, housing standards are not typically enforced. For dairy farmers, years of milk prices at or below the cost of production has steadily driven farms out of business and the remaining farms with little cash to invest in housing.

This paper summarizes findings from research studies conducted between 2010 and 2019 that interviewed Vermont dairy farmers and migrant Spanish-speaking farmworkers (see Table 1). Dairy farms interviewed included only those farms that hired family labor. These studies considered a range of issues related to dairy labor, and this report draws from that work to focus on housing issues and needs of migrant dairy farmworkers. It concludes with recommendations to improve farmworker housing quality.

Table 1:

Dairy Farmer Interviews	
2010	73 farms statewide
2019	71 farms statewide

Farmworkers	
2010	100 farmworkers
2019	100 farmworkers

Housing as part of farmworker compensation

Housing is one of the most common wage benefits dairy farmers provide to their employees. Latinx workers are much more likely to live in farms provided housing than US workers. All farms that employed Latinx workers provided housing and utilities as part of their compensation package. For comparison, only 62% of farms provided housing to US workers and 53% included utilities.



Latinx workers satisfaction with their housing varied widely. For the majority of workers, housing was either not stressful or caused only low levels of stress. However, about a third of Latinx farmworkers the quality of their housing was a significant cause of stress, with 11% reporting it caused them extreme stress in 2018/19. Of dairy workers surveyed on 116 farms, 15 farms (13%) had at least one worker reporting extreme stress, and 43 farms (37%) had at least one worker reporting moderate or extreme stress.

The ability of farmers to address housing deficiencies is limited on many farms. Financial stress was noted by some farmers in interviews in 2018. One farmer, for example, noted that they knew their housing was inadequate and they wanted to repair or replace it, but they simply did not have the money. Another farmer said they'd had good farmworker housing in the road from the farm, and that Latinx workers had previously lived there and driven a tractor back to work on the farm. However, concerns over immigration enforcement had led them to build an apartment in the barn instead.

Housing Density

Housing density in the 2018/19 survey of farmworkers (n=66) ranged from 1 to 9 persons per household, with a median of 4 and a range from 1 to 9 persons per household. The average farmworker dwelling had an average of 3.7 bedrooms, ranging from 1 per household. About 2/3 of workers had their own bedroom and 23% shared a bedroom with a member of their family

or a relative. One indicator that crowding is an issue in some farmworker housing is that more than 1 in 10 farmworkers surveyed in 2018 had to share a bedroom with an unrelated person.

Density is a more complicated issue than it may first appear. Overcrowding was a stressor for about 11% of respondents in 2016. However, in both recent farmworker surveys in 2016 and 2018/19, the number of people living in the dwelling was not stressful for most respondents. There may be several factors involved in this issue. Social isolation is a significant source of stress for many Spanish-speaking workers. Shared spaces with shared language and culture may offer a respite from life in Vermont. Importantly, many farmworkers have relatives among those

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Opportunities, Recommendations & Questions

While most Latino farmworkers report housing to be adequate, for more than 1/3 of Latino dairy workers housing is a significant cause of stress. The following recommendations outline some strategies and opportunities for improving the quality and stock of farmworker housing.

Opportunity: Formalizing a Farmworker Housing Working Group

Farmworker and volunteer Buster Caswell has been advocating for the creation of a formal working group or task force to focus on farmworker housing. There are several hopeful signs this initiative. First, there are clear indications that there is a broad range of stakeholders interested in addressing this issue. A

and type of housing need, the costs to repairs, resources of funding, and strategies to correct problems is poorly understood. Our research on migrant dairy workers found about a 1/3 of workers reported significant stress related to housing. This is an indicator of need, but far from the detail needed to design, fund and implement a program

Recommendation Develop a more detailed understanding of challenges facing farmworker housing is needed.

Questions:

™ Knowledge “silos” exist between organizations and individuals that have knowledge but have not had incentives, or a forum, to share their data on farmworker housing.

How could information sharing be encouraged and facilitated?

™ What are the particular structural deficiencies present in Vermont farmworker housing?

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- ™ Provide expanded technical assistance to farmers seeking to apply for grants to improve farmworker housing.
- ™ Where existing programs that provide funding to improve farmworker housing, e.g. Milk With Dignity are having success from both farmworker and farmer perspectives, build an expand that success.
- ™ Programs that could assist with housing repair and that are also integrated into other societal goals should be considered in the context of farm labor housing. Examples include:
 - Youthbuild -an alternative education model that provides youth with a path to a high school diploma, alongside job training, outside of the classroom.
 - Weatherization Vermont's weatherization program is well established and could be promoted to farmers seeking to improve energy efficiency and comfort in their employees housing.
- ™ Several years ago there was a concerted effort to incentivize farmers to adopt energy efficient employee housing, notably zero energy manufactured homes in the Vermod. Identifying and marketing affordable, high energy efficiency homes to farmers would improve housing stock while also assisting Vermont in reducing carbon emissions.

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