Oregon
COVID-19
FARMWORKER STUDY
Covid19farmworkerstudy.org

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OREGON COFS PHASE TWO INTRODUCTORY REPORT

ESSENTIAL VOICES: FARMWORKER EXPERTISE ON THE ONGOING IMPACTS OF COVID-19

A Report on Phase Two of the COVID-19 Farmworker Study (COFS) prepared by:
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COFS Interns: Kari Mora-Lopez and Matthew Telles

Oregon COVID-19 Farmworker Study

The Oregon COFS is a collaborative research project with a team of social science researchers and twelve farmworkers serving community based-organizations: Bienestar, Casa of Oregon, Centro Cultural de Washington County, Columbia Riverkeepers, Farmworker Human Development Corporation, Huerto de La Familia, Legal Aid Services of Oregon, Oregon Law Center, Euvalcree, Oregon Human Development Corporation, Unete Center for Farmworker and Immigrant Advocacy, and Unidos Bridging Community.

Phase Two research in Oregon was led by Jennifer Martinez-Medina, Doctoral Candidate, Drs. Lynn Stephen, Ron Mize, Gabriela Perez-Baez in partnership with a team of community researchers, Anabel Hernandez-Mejia, Anna Weller, Briseida Bolaños, Dagoberto Morales, Dolores Martinez, Helen Palavecino, Kari Mora, Sandra Martin, Timothy Herrera, and Valentin Sanchez. A wide group of community-based organizations (CBOs), researchers, policy advocates, and graduate students have contributed to OR COFS. Casa of Oregon served as the fiscal sponsor. This phase of the project has been generously funded by Meyer Memorial Trust.

Other funders include the Oregon Community Foundation, Ford Family Foundation, University of Oregon, and Ecotrust. For a full list of project partners and supporters visit www.covid19farmworkerstudy.org.

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This project is fiscally sponsored by Casa of Oregon

The COVID-19 Farmworker Study (COFS) is a model created with the intention of providing critical missing information on farmworkers' abilities to protect themselves and their families during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study brings together a collective of community-based organizations, researchers, and advocates to reveal information that can only be gathered directly from farmworkers who have been working during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Collaboration across Tri-State autonomous COFS studies in Oregon, California, and Washington are facilitated by the California Institute for Rural Studies with participation from a wide group of community-based organizations, researchers, and policy advocates. Visit www.covid19farmworkerstudy.org for a full list of project partners and supporters.

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COVID-19 FARMWORKER STUDY

Oregon COVID-19 FARMWORKER STUDY Covid19farmworkerstudy.org

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CONTENTS

6 TABLE OF CONTENTS

7 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

8 ABBREVIATIONS AND TERMS

9 INTRODUCTION

11 RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

12 I. WHO ARE THE FARMWORKERS FEATURED IN THIS REPORT?

15 II. ESSENTIAL WORKERS: THE CRITICAL IMPORTANCE OF THEIR WORK VS. DEHUMANIZATION

17 III. COVID-19 AT HOME AND WORK: LACK OF PROTECTION, ENFORCEMENT, AND COMMUNICATION

20 IV. SURVIVING COVID-19, WILDFIRES AND MORE

23 V. ON THE EDGE OF SURVIVAL: THE ONGOING CRISES OF FARMWORKER WAGE LOSS BEFORE, DURING, AND AFTER THE PANDEMIC

25 VI.THE NORMALIZATION OF THE CARE CRISIS: THE IMPACT ON WOMEN

27 VII. LANGUAGE AND CULTURAL BARRIERS TO SAFETY, SUPPORT, AND SERVICES

29 VIII. THE INFORMATION GAP

32 SUGGESTIONS TO EMPLOYERS

32 SUGGESTIONS TO ELECTED OFFICIALS

33 OREGON COFS POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Essential Voices: Farmworker Expertise On The Ongoing Impacts Of COVID-19, the introductory report announces findings from Phase Two of the Oregon COVID-19 Farmworker Study (OR COFS), which conducted 48 in-depth interviews with Oregon Farmworkers from February-July 2021. The Phase Two COFS study in Oregon documents the dehumanization farmworkers experience despite the critical importance of their work; lack of protection, enforcement, and communication at work; food insecurity and ongoing ripple effects of wage loss; the normalization of care crisis and its impact on women; and ever more disparate access to information, healthcare, social and economic support, relief, and testing services. These findings parallel those from Phase One, a statewide survey of 300 farmworkers conducted from August to September 2020. Both phases document how the pandemic is exacerbating long-standing crises, vulnerabilities in and out of the workplace, and economic frailties within the food system and heightening insecurity, risk and health disparities for farmworkers and their families that require immediate policy attention. We end with a set of policy recommendations suggested by farmworkers themselves.

ABBREVIATIONS AND TERMS

CBOs = Community Based Organizations

COFS = COVID-19 Farmworker Study

COVID-19 = novel coronavirus disease or severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus - 2 (SARS-CoV-2)

Mesoamerican = Mesoamerica is a region that comprises the southern half of Mexico and northern regions of Central America. It is defined on the basis of common traits found among the myriad cultures and languages of the area. In this report we use this term to refer to Indigenous farmworkers from this region currently living and working in Oregon and in order not to be bound by geopolitical borders and to refer explicitly to a region whose Indigenous peoples have always been culturally and linguistically diverse.

OR COFS = Oregon COVID-19 Farmworker Study

OHA = Oregon Health Authority

OREGON OSHA = Oregon Division of Occupational Safety and Health Administration

Public Charge = Criteria through which immigrant applicants may be denied admission to and residency in the US for having received public benefits or being deemed likely to receive public benefits in the future.[1]

SNAP = Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program

WIC = Women, Infants and Children supplemental food program

Workplace Outbreak = Institutionally designated as five or more cases in workplaces with at least 30 workers in worksites where more than 50% of workers report Covid-19 cases.

[1]Bernstein, H., Gonzalez, D., Karpman, M., & Zuckerman, S. (2019). Amid Confusion over the Public Charge Rule, Immigrant Families Continued Avoiding Public Benefits in 2019. 20.

GLORIA, AGE 37, PACKING HOUSE WORKER, DESCHUTES BASIN:

"The essential worker is the first hand that holds the seed, the plant, until you go into the furrow to plant and then you trim what becomes exposed. The essential workers do everything in the field, from seeding until the fruits and vegetables are cut."

INTRODUCTION

Farmworkers were labeled essential workers and required to continue working throughout the pandemic to sustain today's multibillion-dollar global food system, a role bearing substantial burdens without sufficient protection and support. Oregon is among the eight states with the largest migrant farmworker populations[2]. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the many burdens borne by farmworkers, affecting virtually every realm of their lives (read our Phase 1 report)[3]. This report shares farmworker testimonies–lived experiences of overcoming hardships, family and peer care, exchanges and support, and daily strategies to deal with the emotional and physical stresses brought on by the pandemic. These experiences and perspectives intersect with longstanding systemic racism, economic and social inequalities, climate change, and accumulated levels of precarity that began well before the pandemic and continue through it. Farmworkers carry deep intergenerational knowledge and have creative strategies to protect themselves in and out of the workplace, particularly when state, local, and federal governments fail to provide structures, regulations, and enforcement of worker safety rules. Farmworkers are experts in their fields[4], skilled in their work, and best equipped to provide recommendations for change. The goal of this report is to mobilize findings for broad public use to: (1) Create educational and outreach tools that support the needs of farmworkers and the front-line organizations serving them; (2) Inform

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[2] Hernandez T, Gabbard S. 2018. Findings from the National Agricultural Workers Survey (NAWS) 2015–2016: a demographic and employment profile of United States farmworkers. Res. Rep. 13, US Dep. Labor, Employ. Train. Adm., Washington, DC. https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/ETA/naws/pdfs/NAWS_Research_Report_13.pdf

[3] Oregon COVID-19 Farmworker Study. Phase One Final Report: COVID-19's Disproportionate Impact On Oregon Farmworkers is Far-Reaching and Long-Term. July 14, 2021. https://cirsinc.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/COFS_Report2021_ENG_FULL-compressed.pdf

[4] COVID-19 Farmworker Study. COFS Report: Experts in Their Fields Contributions and Realities of Indigenous Campesinos During the COVID-19 Pandemic. October 18, 2021. https://cirsinc.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/Final_IndigenousReportEnglish_11.8.2021-2.pdf

county, state, and federal governments about urgently needed resources and advocate for direct financial relief, improved access to healthcare, testing, vaccinations, food assistance, and improved information practices to better serve farmworkers; and (3) Highlight policy opportunities that address long-standing, emergent, and ongoing inequalities in farmworker communities.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

The distinctive feature of the COFS studies is collaboration with Community Building Organizations (CBOs) partners at all stages of research, from research design and intent, to development of interview guide and interview tools, data collection and analysis, report writing, and results dissemination. This Phase Two qualitative study follows the quantitative Phase One portion of the study in which 300 farmworkers from agricultural regions throughout Oregon surveyed by members of CBOs working directly with farmworkers and their families.

This short report from the Oregon COFS PHASE II study is part of the larger COFS carried out in California, Oregon, and Washington, coordinated through the California Institute for Rural Studies. Oregon's Phase I project brought together 12 community-based organizations and researchers from three universities in Oregon to design a large phone survey administered to 300 farmworkers published in a report.[5] Following the publication of our first report the Oregon team met to discuss and plan for Phase II. Together, the team designed a set of questions for qualitative interviews and carried out by trusted networks rather than a random sample. The interviews lasted from one to two hours and offered a chance to discuss in-depth participants' experiences through the COVID-19 pandemic and many offered recommendations for policy change. The team met bi-weekly throughout the data collection process to discuss findings. Once the interviews were completed, they were transcribed and analyzed by major themes. The team is in the process of producing podcasts from some of the interviews as a strategy to report back to participants.

Our team, described above, carried out in-depth interviews between February and July of 2021. In total, we completed 48 interviews with people who participated in either a follow-up interview from the Phase One survey or as new respondents who only participated in Phase Two in-depth interviews. All farmworkers quoted throughout the study were given pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality. Farmworkers were paid an incentive of $100 for their time. Organizations were offered overhead and payment for their participating in interviewer training, team meetings, and time and carrying out interviews.

What follows is an introductory report meant to primarily highlight farmworker voices. A longer report will follow with more in-depth information in relation to particular issues, along with an archive of workers' testimonies from our interviews.

[5] Results were collectively analyzed and published in a report, "Oregon COVID-19 Farmworker Study. (2021). COVID-19's Disproportionate Impact on Oregon Farmworkers is Far-Reaching and Long-Term. https://cirsinc.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/COFS_Report2021_ENG_FULL-compressed.pdf.

I. WHO ARE THE FARMWORKERS FEATURED IN THIS REPORT?

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We begin by sharing who we spoke with throughout our in-depth interviews. Sixty-three percent (30) farmworkers identified as women and 38 percent (18) as men. There was an overrepresentation of women in our sample. Despite their long-existing contributions to the food industry, farmworker women have been historically omitted and marginalized from the fields. Their overrepresentation in this phase may indicate their increasing labor participation as well as the caring and emotional work they continue to be responsible for in the home. Many women we spoke to work closely with community organizations to stay informed. Some participate in civic leadership and educational programs offered by CBOs.

Farmworkers represented here reside in twelve different counties in Oregon. The map and table below shows the geographical distribution of interviewees by counties: Marion, Washington, Lane, Umatilla, Jackson, Hood River, Multnomah, Lincoln, Malheur, Morrow, Union, and one farmworker from Adams County, Idaho who works in Oregon and Idaho. We covered several of Oregon's Agricultural Regions as follows: 48% - North Coast and Lower WillametteValley (23); 27% - Central Coast and Southwest Basin (13); 19% - Deschutes Basin (9); 6% - High Desert and Snake River (3). Just under 50% of the farmworkers interviewed work in the North Coast and Lower Willamette Valley (Figure 1), which accounts for about 40% of agricultural production in Oregon, cultivating more than 170 different crops and hosting the vast majority of farmworkers.[6][7] Agricultural employment typically includes jobs in crop production, processing of crops, nurseries and greenhouses, reforestation efforts, and specialty forest product gathering. In some counties, estimates will also cover livestock, other field crops like hay and grass seed, and aquaculture.[8]

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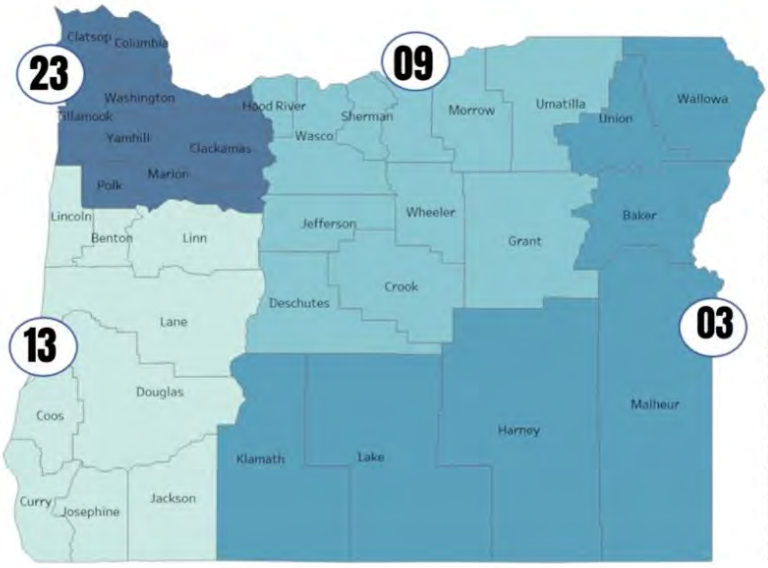
[6] United States Department of Agriculture State Profile. https://www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2017/Online_Resources/County_Profiles/Oregon/index.php

[7] Oregon Department of Agriculture https://www.oregon.gov/ODA/shared/Documents/Publications/Administration/ORGrowingRegions.pdf

[8] Rahe, Mallory. Estimates of Migrant and Seasonal Farmworkers in Agriculture, 2018 Update. Oregon Health Authority, Public Health Division, Health Policy and Analytics Division, 2018.

FIGURE 1. DISTRIBUTION OF INTERVIEWS BY COUNTY



Distrbution by County	Percent
Hood River	6%
Jackson	8%
Lane	17%
Lincoln	2%
Malheur	2%
Marion	25%
Morrow	2%
Multnomah	4%
Umatilla	10%
Union	4%
Washington	19%

About 31% of our respondents identify as Indigenous (15), many of whom also spoke Mesoamerican languages, including: the Mam language of Todo Santos Cuchumatán, Huehuetenango, and from San Sebastián, Huehuetenango, Guatemala, the Mixtec languages of Tecomaxtlahuaca and San Miguel Cuevas, Oaxaca, Mexico, Purépecha (Michoácan, Mexico); the Zapotec language of Santiago Apóstol, Ocotlán, Oaxaca, Mexico); the Náhuatl language of Orizaba, Veracruz, Mexico); and Huichol (Jalisco, Mexico). The other 69% of respondents spoke Spanish and hailed from regions in Mexico (Guanajuato, Guerrero, Jalisco, Michoacán, Morelos, Oaxaca, Veracruz); Guatemala (Huehuetenango, Guatemala, El Progreso), and Honduras.

II. ESSENTIAL WORKERS: THE CRITICAL IMPORTANCE OF THEIR WORK VS. DEHUMANIZATION

At the start of the pandemic, farmworkers were labeled essential workers and asked to continue working. Farmworkers interpreted the term “essential” as contradictory at best. They identified conflicts between the critical importance of their work in keeping the nation fed and the chronic dehumanizing treatment they endure in and out of the workplace.

PEDRO, MAM SPEAKER, ONION FARMWORKER, DESCHUTES BASIN:

“There are times when the weather is better, we work more at ease. But there are times like this summer. When the heat is intense, you feel that you can’t work anymore, but you have to endure because you work out of necessity. And in the summertime, in wintertime, we work. Sometimes we also feel the cold, but we work because it is the most important thing. One has to work...we don’t get used to it, but we do it in order to live."

AMELIA, AGE 47, NURSERY WORKER, NORTH COAST AND LOWER WILLAMETTE VALLEY:

“Well, farmworkers are essential, they work in nurseries, canneries, that go to markets and to stores. Fruits, vegetables, chicken, eggs, all of these are [from] farmworkers. Not just anyone does this work and the work is for the benefit of the community itself. Well, pride, it is not the word, but we are astonished that (we did) so much work in the field with so much exposure to everything: chemicals, to COVID, too many things, and here we are."

SARAI, AGE 57, PACKING HOUSE WORKER, DESCHUTES BASIN:

“They should protect us as workers. They should value us for who we are. We are the people who work every day, who bring food to everyone–their food, to their table– and we are the lowest paid and...we work hard...I came to this country to work and contribute, not to receive. I have lived through difficult situations in this country. ...Despite contributing to my taxes year after year, I have not received benefits. When I was looking for housing or a benefit of medical insurance for my children, I was denied.”

AMARI, VINEYARD WORKER, CENTRAL COAST AND SOUTHWEST BASIN:

“They don’t care about the health of people or anything. What they want is that they get work out of us. If someone dies of COVID, there will be two or three others who are waiting to get the work. They don’t care about us.”

III. COVID-19 AT HOME AND WORK: LACK OF PROTECTION, ENFORCEMENT, AND COMMUNICATION

"Fifty- three% (25) of the farmworkers did not fully feel protected in the workplace and many reported they generally felt uninformed about workplace infections."

The pandemic heightened attention to the many obstacles farmworkers are managing during the pandemic. Still, interviewees observed that although rules established to protect and support them exist in Oregon–such as sick time, rental assistance, and paid family leave– in reality, rules are not always enforced or provided. Oregon farmworkers also lack access to information about what employer benefits they are entitled to. Workers know that Oregon OSHA is supposed to enforce the rules, but rarely does this happen. Further, not all agricultural and food industry employers practice or enforce masking and distancing, even though it is prescribed by law and workers prefer it. Fifty-three% (25) of the farmworkers did not fully feel protected in the workplace and many reported they generally felt uninformed about workplace infections. Legally prescribed rules, protections, and benefits for farmworkers are often not communicated clearly or in farmworkers' preferred languages, especially Indigenous languages. Workers themselves are often put in charge of maintaining safety protocols

CONCHITA, MAM SPEAKER, BLUEBERRY WORKER, NORTH COAST AND LOWER WILLAMETTE VALLEY:

"Those of us who are working in the fields, at that time we were hardly earning much. We are just covering all the bills, rent, water, light, and all that. When the pandemic came, or the fires too, it affected us. Well, I say, it's important that they [legislators] help, although we are not residents. We also need help, because we want to eat and have needs. It would be better for each of us to receive some help, even a little is something for us."

NADIA, MIXTECO ALTO SPEAKER, AGE 49, FARMWORKER, NORTH COAST AND LOWER WILLAMETTE VALLEY:

"They do not care that we are close. They do not follow the rules, six feet apart as it should be. They do not give us masks. They gave us a meeting about wearing a mask and being away from others. But the job sometimes requires us to be close. Sometimes they put us close when we cut the cabbage. They don't care if you get sick or infected. No, if you want to work. They don't care much about what we say."

CHANO, AGE 33, NURSERY AND PACKING HOUSE WORKER, NORTH COAST AND LOWER WILLAMETTE VALLEY:

“One day we were working on the side of the road. We were planting trees. Like 50 of us. Someone called the agency that handles that. They [Oregon OSHA] arrived and saw a lot of people without a mask. And they themselves said that since it was outdoors if they didn't have the masks, there was no problem. Then they just checked the restrooms and counted how many restrooms there were and saw that the number of people in the restrooms was fine.”

NADIA, MIXTECO SPEAKER, AGE 49, FARMWORKER, NORTH COAST AND LOWER WILLAMETTE VALLEY:

“Sometimes we don't have paper or disinfectant...even the bathroom is dirty. We have to go to the office to ask for a roll of paper. They [Oregon OSHA] came but they haven't done anything. they've already gone about twice. They ask people...well, a supervisor there asks if everything is fine. They have not done anything, that is the truth. Yes, the last time they [Oregon OSHA] arrived, a little while ago, they asked me and another lady if we spoke Spanish and we said no. Then they asked another woman. They said everything was fine, that we have water and bathrooms. Everyone is in favor of the company, they didn't do anything. We don't have a break area...we eat in our cars.”

IV. SURVIVING COVID-19, WILDFIRES AND MORE

For many farmworker families, surviving COVID-19 infection was a major accomplishment borne out of struggle and persistence and intimate knowledge of traditional remedies and strategies of coping. Being very sick and caring for others who were sick with COVID-19 was not a distant reality but a daily lived experience. During the time frame of the interviews (February to July 2021). 52% of interviewees tested positive, 38% had not been infected, and 10% chose not to disclose. Nearly all noted knowing multiple family members, friends, coworkers, and acquaintances who had been sick with COVID-19. With limited access to medical attention, farmworkers dealt with compounding health conditions such as diabetes, smoke and heat exposure, all of which aggravated impacts of the pandemic.[9] We asked farmworkers about the COVID-19 vaccine as it began to roll out. The majority of respondents reported willingness to take the vaccine when it became available as the vaccine became more available; more farmworkers reported they had already been vaccinated. In their answers, several farmworkers stated they initially had doubts about the vaccine or were well aware of misinformation in their peer circles. Still only a couple of farmworkers in the sample said they would not be willing to take the vaccine.

"52% of interviewees tested positive, 38% had not been infected, and 10% chose not to disclose."

ELVA, MIXTECO SPEAKER, AGE 40, FORESTRY, NORTH COAST AND LOWER WILLAMETTE VALLEY:

"It was a bit bad because it feels very bad with Covid, and I worried because I was the only adult in the house with my four children. Well, we were in quarantine. The Centro Cultural de Washington County helped us. They sent us food, they sent us toilet paper, milk, everything."

[9] Villarejo, D. (2003). The health of US hired farm workers. Annual Review of Public Health, 24(1), 175-193.

JUAN, MAM SPEAKER AGE 42, BERRY AND GRAPE HARVESTER, NORTH COAST AND LOWER WILLAMETTE VALLEY:

“Well, the group that we have is a group of our people who speak Mam.... There are people in need, and who get sick....or they get injured, and they do not have families, because many people are here without family, just alone—even without brothers or cousins.... So, when they get sick, who is going to take care of them? Who is going to give them food to eat? Who is going to pay their rent and the bills? So that's why we formed a group to support those in need, those who get sick, those who have an accident."

ELENA, AGE 46, NURSERY WORK, CENTRAL COAST AND SOUTHWEST BASIN:

“If we are healthy, what we send will be healthy, and if some of [farmworkers] do not have their vaccines or they can’t secure them, well, [farmworkers] become sick. It would be nice if [policymakers] procured the vaccine for all farmworkers. Well, even better if everyone was provided free vaccines. We [farmworkers] are essential workers and we expose ourselves more than anyone else. We feed the United States, even in the midst of obstacles, such as the pandemic, low pay, the fires, and we work with the fire, and we cannot take off our masks due to the pandemic."

V. ON THE EDGE OF SURVIVAL: THE ONGOING CRISES OF FARMWORKER WAGE LOSS BEFORE, DURING, AND AFTER THE PANDEMIC

Interviewees documented their ongoing economic precarity before, during, and after the peaks of the pandemic. Some discussed how they changed their diet, worried about getting all the foods they needed and the lower nutritional value of the food they were able to buy and prepare. Worried about being labeled as a “public charge,” some stopped asking for the state and federally funded food assistance such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits they were entitled to. Others just did the best they could. For most, the pressure to continue working was ongoing and intensified in situations of insecurity at work and at home with constant anxiety about getting sick with COVID-19. Many never recovered from lost wages and hours of work and continued struggling to pay their bills one year into the pandemic.

"Some discussed how they changed their diet, worried about getting all the foods they needed and the lower nutritional value of the food they were able to buy and prepare. Worried about being labeled as a “public charge,” some stopped asking for the state and federally funded food assistance such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits they were entitled to."

ALEJANDRA, AGE 52, PACKING HOUSE WORKER, DESCHUTES BASIN:

"What worries me is getting infected at home, because I live in a very small place and share the same bathroom with the whole family. And well, psychologically people are affected and also economically because when that happens, you also stop working and then you have certain expenses for your home or your expenses you need.”

ELENA, AGE 46, NURSERY WORKER, CENTRAL COAST AND SOUTHWEST BASIN:

“I searched for food, too. I didn't have anything to eat. Well... I bought the most basic things which were beans, rice, and potatoes. With that, we ate tortillas, and my husband bought Maseca to make tortillas at home, so we wouldn’t have to buy them.”

ALEJANDRA, AGE 52, PACKING HOUSE, DESCHUTES BASIN:

“We were in a process and in need at the time of food, but they said we could be a public charge. So we stopped asking for food stamps [SNAP benefits]. Maybe it will affect [us]. It makes me sad because many people have children and a single salary is not enough for food, or for other expenses.”

VI.THE NORMALIZATION OF THE CARE CRISIS: THE IMPACT ON WOMEN

"While some women have access to some forms of healthcare, few have access to emotional health support and to services like free or subsidized and safe childcare that would alleviate their great care-taking responsibilities."

With children out of school, many family members sick with COVID-19, and others recovering, many farmworker households were consumed with additional care work. For women, this added to their other labors. Lack of social contact, isolation, constant stress at work and at home left many farmworker women feeling challenged to take care of themselves as they continued to support others. For women who are single mothers, the responsibilities can be crushing. While some women have access to some forms of healthcare, few have access to emotional health support and to services like free or subsidized and safe childcare that would alleviate their great care-taking responsibilities. They had little to no time for self-care.

GLORIA, AGE 37, PACKING HOUSE, DESCHUTES BASIN:

"No. There is no childcare. I [applied for] help with childcare because the truth is I pay for a babysitter and work these days doesn't work out with COVID-19. The cheapest [for a babysitter] was $15 for my girl and $20 for my boy. In other words, it's $35 a day and I work three days. Imagine, it's $105. And right now they are paying us about $13.61 an hour and that is what I told them. It doesn't come out, and I tell him if I earned $400, which it isn't because, with all the deductions, I'm going to pay $105 for babysitting. How much am I going to keep? Then apart [money] for gas and everything."

NADIA, MIXTECO SPEAKER, AGE 49, FARMWORKER, NORTH COAST AND LOWER WILLAMETTE VALLEY:

“I am a single mother, and since the pandemic began, my son has been depressed, and I try to get him out. They were helping him at school. The school was closed. I have been battling with my son so that he would come out of it on his own, I have to help him not get depressed. He was very afraid of the disease. He was suffering every day because I was going to work. He tells me that he is very afraid that I would get sick.”

AMARI, VINEYARD WORKER, CENTRAL COAST AND SOUTHWEST BASIN:

"What I would like them to add back is WIC [Women, Infants and Children (WIC) food program]. They treated us for women's wellness treatments. Those services have already been taken away from us. They gave us Pap Smears, breast exams."

VII. LANGUAGE AND CULTURAL BARRIERS TO SAFETY, SUPPORT, AND SERVICES

"Our Phase 2 Study registered three new Mesoamerican Languages bringing our total to 29 documented languages. Indigenous respondents, 30 percent of our total, all brought up the issue of language and cultural barriers that created information blocks, and lack of access to support and services to which they are legally entitled."

Our Phase 2 Study registered three new Mesoamerican Languages bringing our total to 29 documented languages. Indigenous respondents, 30 percent of our total, all brought up the issue of language and cultural barriers that created information blocks, and lack of access to support and services to which they are legally entitled. Indigenous respondents, 30 percent of our total, all brought up the issue of language and cultural barriers that created information blocks, and lack of access to support and services to which they are legally entitled. Interviewees pointed out that even when information about particular services or programs was available in their languages, there was no follow-through from agencies or service providers. Simply notifying people in Mam or Zapotec, for example, about where farmworkers can get vaccinated or where they can get food assistance is not enough. Additional steps require having service navigators available who can meet or consult directly with them and work with them in their own languages.

SUSANA, MAM SPEAKER, AGE 48, POTATO, TREE FRUIT, AND NUT HARVESTER, DESCHUTES BASIN:

"I don't know where to find or I don't know where the office is. Yes. For example, finding someone who can speak English, Spanish, and Mam who could help us, someone who could explain in Mam would be better. That would help us to understand things and know that it is a support for us who are from Guatemala."

MARISELA, MAM SPEAKER, AGE 30, SALAL AND BLUEBERRY WORKER, HIGH DESERT AND SNAKE RIVER:

“I think it would be better if they got us information in our language by phone because I can connect information [using internet] links through the phone. The information appears in the Mam language. They give us information about how many people are affected or what is happening with COVID-19. They speak Mam and sometimes they talk about Oregon so I listen [to those] giving that information. It’s through Facebook. But, no. I don't know anything, I don't have information about vaccines or if there is a cure for COVID. I have no idea where to ask for help and where to go.”

VIII. THE INFORMATION GAP

"Fifty-three percent (25) of respondents said they experienced a workplace outbreak. In some cases farmworkers described these outbreaks as not being reported to employees or being asked to return back to work."

As the COVID-19 pandemic progressed, farmworkers often received no information or inconsistent information regarding what they were supposed to do if there was a workplace outbreak. Fifty-three percent (25) of respondents said they experienced a workplace outbreak. In some cases, farmworkers described these outbreaks as not being reported to employees or being asked to return back to work.[10] Some who had family members with underlying medical conditions were wary of going to work in the midst of large outbreaks. Employers didn't provide consistent information about what to do if you are sick, if you have been exposed, and whether or not you would get paid if you were quarantined, regardless of whether you were sick yourself. Lack of consistent and clear information about workplace safety rules, quarantining, recovery, and returning to work as experienced by farmworkers mirrored an information gap about other services and benefits that they should be eligible for. Farmworkers identified a variety of trusted information sources they utilized: CBOs; formal media sources and community radios; peer information from social media, in-person, community circles, churches, stores, promotoras linked to a non-government organization; and in some cases public health institutions & public officials. Only a couple of farmworkers cited employers as a trusted information source.

GLORIA, AGE 37, PACKING HOUSE WORKER, DESCHUTES BASIN:

"Well, 60 [workers] came out infected, plus the infected throughout the week. They gave me a test, but I did not come out positive. I told them I am not going to work because my child has asthma. I'm afraid they're going to get sick. Then they asked if I had any symptoms. I said, no. [They said] "Then you have to come to work." I said NO! By law, I hear that if there are infections we must quarantine. Several of us got informed. We also called the clinic, the one connected to the packing house. I wanted to give myself rest for my children and they didn't want to give it [the rest] to me."

[10] The Oregon Health Authority (OHA) is required to report suspected workplace outbreaks and considers outbreaks as those with five or more cases in workplaces with at least 30 workers in worksites where more than 50% of workers report Covid-19 cases.

AMELIA, AGE 47, BERRY HARVESTER, NORTH COAST AND LOWER WILLAMETTE VALLEY:

“If you go home and take the test and you come out positive, well, they do pay you. I said, "if I stay at home and I don't come out positive, they won't pay me my days that I am going to be home and what am I going to do?” So, I stayed at work and, well, I worked with my precautions. I worked it out in my mind that if I had symptoms or something like that, well, I was going to tell them.”

IX. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Farmworkers are the experts not only on the kinds of challenging conditions they faced at home and at work before and during the pandemic and related fire and heat events, but their experiences provide them with unique insights into how to improve their lives and conditions at work. Below are some policy suggestions from farmworkers for employers and elected officials.

SUGGESTIONS TO EMPLOYERS

1. “Well, they should put inspectors on farms so that they are regularly checking all the operations. These inspectors should check that they have everything that the worker needs to have a safe and healthy environment. It is also up to the employee to report if there is a problem, but the government also has to be checking them in some way.
-ROQUE, AGE 58, HAY WORKER, CENTRAL COAST AND SOUTHWEST BASIN

2. “They should support us with the vaccine…everyone in the world deserves to receive it and I believe that agricultural workers… We also need the vaccine. We are essential workers.”
-PASTOR, AGE 32, ORCHARD WORKER, DESCHUTES BASIN

SUGGESTIONS TO ELECTED OFFICIALS

1. “They need to educate the bosses and not just the people. I think I would ask them to enforce the existing laws and make more laws to force the bosses to take care of their people."
-INEZ, AGE 53, HEMP WORKER, CENTRAL COAST AND SOUTHWEST BASIN

2. "I think we would all be happy if they gave us the documents [immigration] we need to work in different jobs, with more benefits. Because when you work in the field, there are no benefits. If you have your papers in order, then they give you benefits for tomorrow or the day after."
-INEZ, AGE 53, HEMP WORKER, CENTRAL COAST AND SOUTHWEST BASIN

3. "That they take into account the Indigenous people. We are also human and we need more support, including assistance. We need information for well-being and to prevent diseases or so we can be prepared for when a disaster may come."
-ANGEL, PURÉPECHA SPEAKER, AGE 44, NURSERY WORKER, NORTH COAST AND LOWER WILLAMETTE VALLEY

4. " We want them to make sure that everyone is vaccinated, everyone, including minors, because we are all at risk of becoming infected with this disease. It is the safest thing. I think that would be it, that they mandate us to vaccinate."
-LUZ, AGE 54, STRAWBERRY HARVESTER AND FORESTRY WORKER, NORTH COAST AND LOWER WILLAMETTE VALLEY:

OREGON COFS POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS[11]

1. Provide access to culturally informed methods of mental health support in a variety of languages and administered through trusted community clinics and universities partnerships.

2. Provide access to culturally informed methods of mental health support in a variety of languages and administered through trusted community clinics and universities partnerships.

3. Implement digital literacy programs staffed with navigators to help farmworker families' (students and parents) get connected, improve access to technology, and balance screen time by offering learning programs, supplying smartphones, tablets, and stipends to offset internet service costs.

4. Sustain, replenish, and expand state and community-led income and safety net support for farmworkers regardless of documentation status, such as the Temporary Paid Leave Program, Oregon Workers Relief Fund, COVID-19 Farmworker Rental Relief Fund, Oregon Worker Quarantine Fund with expanded qualifications and retroactive eligibility, and allow the Oregon State Individual Taxpayer Identification Number filers to claim Earned Income Tax Credit.

5. Reduce barriers to accessing safety net support by allocating resources to community-based organizations that reflect the communities they are serving (including Indigenous-led organizations) that have a history of working with the population, and equip them with appropriate language interpreters.

6. Address loss of wages that impacted farmworker women and others by expanding overtime eligibility for farmworkers and investigate gender based discrimination during layoffs.

7. Create a state coordinated human focused response team to ease barriers for exercising legal rights and provide guidance on relief applications by connecting farmworkers to legal and resource navigators that can provide legal advice on workplace rights, tenant rights, concerns over public charge, immigrant rights, drivers license, and resource applications in the languages farmworkers speak.

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[11] OR COFS Policy Recommendations listed resulted from Phase 1 findings as proposed by members of the Policy and Action Committee.

8. Mandate employers provide adequate training, when not already required, in languages farmworkers use and provide targeted plans through experienced translators and interpreters to improve language accessibility of information, rules, guidance published by government agencies, by funding local organizers and navigators that can reach and inform farmworkers who speak Indigenous languages. This means that the language the interpreter speaks is a correct language match, the interpreter has received training as an interpreter, and is not a family member.

9. Enforce existing anti-retaliation and workplace protections that assure farmworkers can take time off and/or can file employer complaints without fear of retribution, such as supporting stronger Whistleblower protections and abolishing farm labor collective bargaining restrictions.

10. Strengthen Oregon/OSHA occupational safety enforcement and worksite auditing activities, including random inspections.

11. To reach Oregon's farmworkers in the administration of the vaccine, resources and information should flow to farmworker health clinics and farmworker serving organizations to connect farmworkers to vaccines with appropriate language diversity to serve the farmworker population to provide frequent and extensive access to COVID-19 testing and vaccinations.

12. Expand the stock of housing opportunities that can serve farmworker families facing housing insecurity and/or needing temporary quarantining shelter with adequate social distancing or shelter to recover from housing loss from fires.

13. Support farmworkers sending remittances to their families and communities back by reducing money transfer fees and forming matching funds support for their communities back home.

14. Establish a center for farmworker research that is rooted in community-based research that can continue the effort of this study.

Recommendations are proposed by members of the OR COFS Policy and Action Committee: CASA of Oregon, UNETE, Oregon Human Development Corporation, Centro Cultural de Washington County, Columbia Riverkeepers, Euvalcree, Farmworker Housing Development Corporation, Unidos Yamhill County, Bienestar, and PCUN.

For a full list of policy recommendations please visit our website at http://covid19farmworkerstudy.org/