

Protect Agricultural Workers in Washington State, Q&A - CALL TO ACTION!

COVID 19 - Protect Agricultural Workers in Washington State, Protect the Food Supply – We need your help!



Latino Civic Alliance (LCA) is demanding enforceable standards so that the Governor and State of Washington prioritize agriculture workers and protect our food systems during this COVID 19 pandemic. We are asking for your help to join us and our community partners to protect workers during this crisis and in the future. We want equitable treatment with the retail, construction, and technology industry. Washington State is one of the largest agriculture economies in the United States and the estimate is 90% of the Ag workforce in the State are Latino. Agriculture and food and beverage production support an estimated \$20.1 billion in revenue. The state is the leading producer of red raspberries, hops, apples, sweet cherries, pears, concord grapes, and spearmint and peppermint oils, which are shipped around the globe to customers who appreciate their quality, flavor and value. Washington is also a leader in seafood production, second only to Alaska in shipments of fish and shellfish. The Agriculture workforce contributes to the Agriculture economic success in our nation and world recognition; however, the workforce is below poverty levels, and lacks healthcare benefits, paid sick leave, and decent wages. Agriculture workers consist of Field Workers, Warehouse, Seafood, Dairy, Poultry, Tree & Fruit, Meat Processing, and these workers contribute to the overall success of the State of Washington.

Question #1: Why are Agricultural Workers important and need more protection in the workplace?

Answer: Food is essential to our very existence and Ag workers are like first responders, responding to get food to our tables and on the front lines every day. Agricultural workers, like health care workers, have been declared essential workers. Farmworkers have been working straight through the COVID 19 pandemic and we need to provide them with protective equipment and treat them like health care providers. Ag workers risk their health making sure we have fresh fruits and vegetables, and meat, milk, and eggs. They help keep our food supply strong and on the store shelves. Requiring a safe workplace is part of food security and part of containing this pandemic.

Question #2: What is an Agricultural Worker? Is that the same as a Farmworker?

Answer: The agricultural industry is diverse in Washington State and Ag workers can be found in every county, on both sides of the mountains. “Ag worker” is a general term used for

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workers on farms, in fields and orchards, in warehouses, in packing sheds, in vineyards, berry fields, dairies, poultry operations, meat packing plants, in seafood operations, in the timber industry, green forest product floral-shop industry, and on Christmas tree farms. Sometimes we use the term Ag Worker and Farmworker interchangeably.

Question #3. What does the data tell us?

Answer: It tells us two things, that Ag Workers were already in a crisis before the pandemic hit and that they are being hit harder than any other community in Washington State.

- Latinos make up over 90% of the Ag Workers in Washington State.
- Ag Workers have an average life expectancy of 49 years.
- The conservative estimate is there are 400,000 Ag Workers in this state, which includes families and H2A workers, and is a workforce that continually changes due to interstate migration.
- Latinos are 13% of the population in Washington State and are over 30% of COVID-19 cases. This increase is alarming.
- Ag Workers are especially vulnerable to COVID-19 due to decades of exposure to pesticides, exhaustion from work, lack of access to health care, low wages, and substandard and often crowded housing.

Question #4. What is the H2-A Program? We hear about it in the news, how is it related to local domestic workers in our state?

Answer: Currently the Washington State agricultural workforce consists of domestic workers that reside with their families permanently in our state or migrate from other states during harvest season, this is most of the agricultural workers. There is a federal program called the H2-A program, which allows employers to bring foreign workers mostly from Mexico for temporary work and these workers are also at risk. An estimated 35,000 H2-A workers are expected this year. Because this is a federal program, which limits the State's ability to protect, we are concerned for their safety – they too are reported to be sick with COVID 19. If our state has not provided our domestic workers protective equipment, how can we expect guest workers to be treated any differently?

Question #5: What needs to be done to keep the workplace safe?

Answer: We need State mandatory enforceable standards so that Ag Workers are not exposed to COVID-19. The Governor must require growers, packers, and producers to maintain a safe workplace. The growers, packers, and producers must:

- Make sure the workers can maintain social distancing,
- Put physical barriers between workers in warehouses, meat plants, and elsewhere,
- Make sure there is easy access to hand washing stations with soap, water, and paper towels,
- Do daily cleaning of equipment and facilities,

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- Provide housing that is disinfected and not crowded. Today many families can live in one very small dwelling, for example 500 square feet – this proximity is challenging for controlling the spread of the virus.
- Maintain sanitized transportation with ample space - for those Ag Employers who provide transportation vehicles must be sanitized and social distancing complied with.
- Ensure there is no retaliation for becoming ill, or reporting workplace compliance issues with COVID-19 safety rules

Question #6: Tell me about housing. How does Ag Worker housing impact the lives of the workers and the food system?

Answer: Farmworker housing is critical to the food supply. We all need food, shelter, and water. Clean, safe housing is a key part of health for everyone. Substandard housing has been a decades long issue in the Ag industry and COVID-19 is exposing this and showing us how that puts the food supply at risk. Ag Workers are low-wage workers living at or near poverty and affordable housing is challenging. Often Employers provide temporary housing that is crowded, unsanitary, and unsafe, especially H2-A workers. People sleep side by side in tent camps and bunkhouses often in remote areas. Sick workers have no place to isolate and whole families and communities are at risk because of this.

Question #7: What more do I need to understand about Ag Workers safety and protect the food supply?

Answer: First, remember that Ag Workers have never had basic protections. They are not protected under the National Fair Labor Standards Act passed in 1935– they and service workers i.e. maids etc. are the only workforce that was not included, compared to other industries, construction, healthcare, hospitality and janitorial, and more. This has elevated the national crisis and the need for protecting farmworkers, who were already considered vulnerable before the pandemic. Like communities of color across the nation Ag Workers are hit hard in this state. Ag Workers need access to health care, need paid sick leave, need childcare for their families, need access to educational technology for their school age children, need testing for COVID-19, and need safe places for quarantine.

Question #8: Why does Latino Civic Alliance care about Ag Workers? Why are you putting so much effort into this?

Answer: LCA is a state-wide advocacy organization. We cover the whole state and work closely with the Latino community. Our roots will always be in the farmworker community. Most of our Board members are from 1st, 2nd, or 3rd generation farmworker families and some still have relatives working in the agriculture industry. We also are committed to partner with the Governor and State Agencies to Protect farmworkers.

Question #9: I don't come from a farmworker background and I don't know any farmworkers but want to help protect our food system. How can I get involved?

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Answer: You can join with the thousands of individuals and the many organizations that LCA is partnering with to contact Governor Inslee and let him know that you care about Ag Workers, you care about the food supply and food security, and he should make the safety of Ag Workers a priority. You can communicate with your State Legislators and ask them to act. You can communicate with your city and county officials and ask them to contact their district Legislators.

Question #10: We are in a crisis and need to ACT NOW! What should I do?

Answer: You can pick up the phone and make two calls:

(A) Call the Governor at 360.902.4111 and ask to leave a message:

"Good morning/afternoon/evening, Governor Inslee.
My name is _____ and I live in _____.

I am calling to ask that you make the health and safety of farm workers a state-wide priority. I am worried about farm workers and their families. I am worried about the state economy and about continuing access to food and growing numbers of farmworkers becoming ill.

Agricultural employers must provide safe working conditions and safe housing.

Farm workers need immediate access to health care, food assistance, and educational assistance.

I join others in asking that you issue an emergency proclamation that **FARMWORKERS MATTER**, and require employers to provide safe workplaces to protect the work force and protect our food supply. Taking care of Ag Workers is a key part of food security. Thank you."

AND

(B) Call the legislative hotline at 1-800-562-6000. They will ask you where you live and will make sure your message gets to your legislators:

"My name is _____ and I live in _____.

I am calling to ask that you help bring the Governor's full attention to the plight of farm workers during the COVID-19 crisis. The Governor needs to make the health and safety of farm workers a state-wide priority. This is about safety and wellbeing, it is about the state economy, and it is about food security. I am worried about farm workers and their families. I

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am worried about the state economy and about continuing access to food and the growing numbers of farmworkers becoming ill.

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Farmworkers need access to health care, food assistance, and educational assistance.

Please ask the Governor to issue an emergency proclamation that FARMWORKERS MATTER, and require employers to provide safe workplaces to protect the work force and protect our food supply. Taking care of Ag Workers is a key part of food security. Thank you. "

Or

If you would rather email

(C) Contact the Governor's Chief of Staff David Postman at David.Postman@gov.wa.gov with this message:

"My name is _____ and I live in _____.

I am writing to ask that the Governor make the health and safety of farm workers a state-wide priority. I am worried about farm workers and their families. I am worried about the state economy and about continuing access to food and growing numbers of farmworkers becoming ill.

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How to contact LCA and learn more what you can do to help: email info@latinocivicalliance.org or visit website www.latinocivicalliance.com

